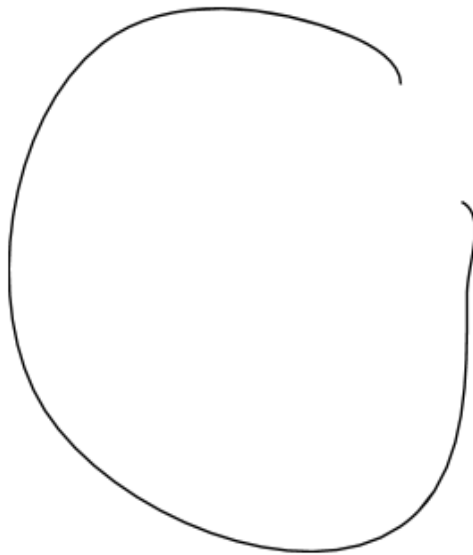


# **AWKWARDNESS AS A TOOL IN MY ARTISTIC PRACTICE**



**Miradonna Sirkka  
Master's Thesis in Visual Culture,  
Curating and Contemporary Art  
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|--|---------------------------|-------------------------|
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Opinnäytetyö on kuvaus kiusallisuudesta työvälineenä taiteellisessa työskentelyssäni. Kiusallisuus on tilanteesta, paikasta, ajasta, yksilöstä ja hänen kokemuksistaan riippuva käsite, sitä ei voi määritellä ulkopuolelta. Käsittelen aihetta Adam Kotskon kiusallisuuden, Richard Schechnerin esitystutkimuksen sekä Jaques Rancieren vapautuneen katsojan teorioiden pohjalta. Opinnäytetyö on autoetnografia: käytän omaa taiteellista työskentelyä tutkimusmetodinä. Esittelen kolme taideteosta kiusallisuuden valossa, jotka olen tehnyt opiskeluiden aikana Aalto-yliopistossa. Teokset ovat nykysirkuksen, installaatioiden, mediataiteen ja poikkitaiteisen työskentelyn hybridejä.

Kiusallisuudesta on muodostunut sosiaalisen median kautta arkipäiväinen trendi. Opinnäytetyössä kuvailen, miten kiusallisuutta voi hyödyntää taiteellisessa työskentelyssä sekä esiintyjän että osallistuja-katsojan näkökulmasta. Taustani nykysirkustaiteilijana sekä kokemus poikkitaiteisesta työskentelystä tuo uutta perspektiiviä alalle. Kiusallisuudesta taiteellisenä keinona nykysirkuksen kentällä ei ole kirjoitettu aiemmin.

Opinnäytetyössäni keskityn kiusallisuuden positiivisiin puoliin. Kerron mitä hyötyä kiusallisuudesta on, mistä se johtuu ja miten sen voin kääntää ratkaisukeskeisesti työskentelykeinoksi sekä huumorin lähteeksi. Kiusallisuus liittyy oleellisesti sosio-ekonomisiin valta-asetelmiin, totuttuihin sosiaalisiin normeihin, kulttuurieroihin sekä hyväksyntään ja tasa-arvoon. Kerron, millä taiteen, erityisesti esittävän taiteen, keinoin kiusallisuuden sietokykyä voi kasvattaa ja miksi se lisää avarakatseisuutta, hyvinvointia sekä tasa-arvoa yhteiskunnassa. Tavoitteena on löytää ja koetella yhteiskunnan sosiaalisten normien rajoja sekä laajentaa niitä, jotta ennako-oletukset eivät olisi niin tiukkoja ja sosiaalinen ilmapiiri ottaisi huomioon paremmin myös hiljaisia vähemmistöjä. Opinnäytetyössä esitellään normit, jotka länsimaisessa kulttuurissa pohjautuvat amerikkalaiseen käsitykseen “normaalista” elämästä. Johtopäätökseni on, että sekä taiteilijan että yleisön uskaltautuessa kohtaamaan kiusallisia, haastaviakin tilanteita, voi olla mahdollista muuttaa omia sekä vallitsevia ennako-oletuksia.

Rajauksen vuoksi työ on tehty yhden ihmisen, länsimaisesta kulttuurista tulevan taiteilijan, näkökulmasta. Jatkossa tulisi huomioida kokijoiden ja katsojien kokemuksia teoksista ja kiusallisuuden kokemuksesta enemmän. Kiusallisuus keinona taiteellisessa työskentelyssä on laaja sekä joustava käsite määriteltäväksi. Sitä voisi viedä pidemmälle antropologisen tutkimuksen kautta ottamalla huomioon useampia eriäviä näkökulmia sekä kulttuuritaustoja.

**Avainsanat:** kiusallisuus, esittävä taide, performanssi, nykysirkus, poikkitaiteisuus, käyttäytyminen

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This master thesis is a portrayal of awkwardness as a tool in my artistic practice. Awkwardness is a subjective term that depends on the environment, cultural background, timing, feelings and experiences of the individual. It cannot wholly be defined from the outside. I approach the subject with the help of Adam Kotsko's research on awkwardness, and Richard Schechner's research on performance, alongside Jacques Rancière's theory of the emancipated spectator. This thesis is autoethnography; I use my own artistic practice as a research method. I introduce three artworks that I have created during my studies at Aalto University. The works are hybrids of contemporary circus, installation, media art, and interdisciplinary working.

In this thesis I am concentrating on the positive sides of awkwardness. I will explain how awkwardness can be utilized in one's artistic practice from the point of view of the artist. My background as a circus artist and my expertise in interdisciplinary methods provides the contemporary circus field with new insight. Awkwardness has not been discussed in this way within the field of contemporary circus before.

I will elaborate on why awkwardness is useful, where it originates from, and how it can be turned into a fruitful working method – and into a source of humor as well. Awkwardness relates fundamentally to socio-economic power structures, customary social norms, cultural differences, acceptance, and equality. I will explain how art, especially the performing arts, can reinforce one's tolerance of awkwardness, and why this adds to open-mindedness, well-being, and social equality. My aim is to fathom and try the confines of social norms and to expand them so that our preconceptions would not be as harsh, and the social atmosphere would also take into account the quieter minorities. My conclusion on the matter is, that if the artist and the audience dare to face awkward and even challenging situations, it is possible to change the preconceptions in ourselves and the society around us.

To keep the text consistent and within the constraints of a master thesis, I wrote from the perspective of one person – myself. I present Western norms related to the subject that is based on the American conception of "a normal life". In the future, the audience's experience of artworks and awkwardness should be considered more. Awkwardness as a tool in artistic practice is a wide and flexible idea that could be pursued more, for example in the field of anthropological research, ranging into different viewpoints and cultures.

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**Keywords** awkwardness, performing arts, performance, contemporary circus, cross-disciplinary, behavior

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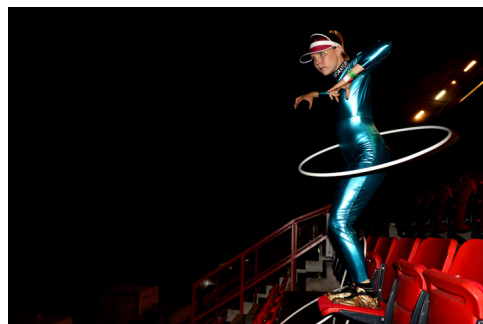
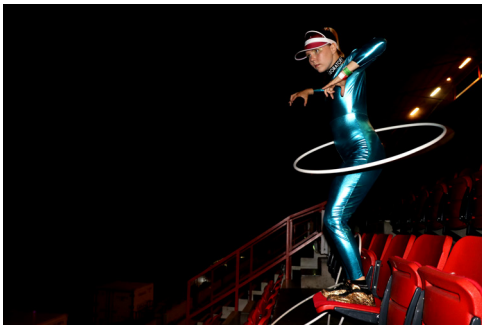
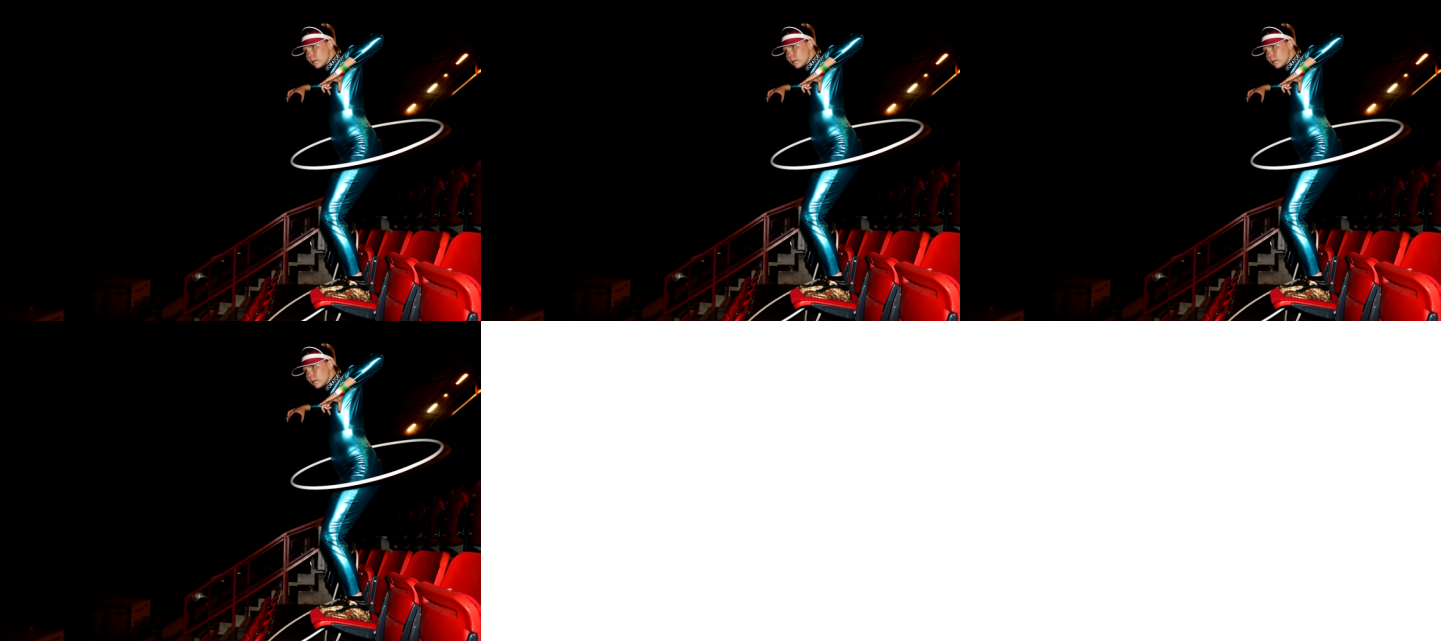
*Thinking about*

*Recover Laboratory*

*“Everything is possible, just like in an ordinary day”*

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*Photo: Luumu Jokelainen, Sideways-festival 2019*

# Why and how to explore awkwardness?

## My background as a contemporary circus performer

In this master thesis, I am writing about awkwardness as a tool in my artistic practice. As my research method, I use autoethnography. Autoethnography is a combination of autobiography and ethnography. It means describing own experiences in relation to the culture and others.<sup>1</sup> The method is suitable because I am using my artworks and the process as a source and reflecting my own experiences with the existing theory. I will explain how I experience awkwardness as a performer and an artist, and how I am using awkwardness as a tool in my artistic practice through three artworks I have made during my master studies in the degree program of Visual Culture and Contemporary Art in Aalto University between 2017-2020.

The artworks are *Living like there is no tomorrow* (video installation and performance), *Donna Drive* (media art), *The Artist Talk* (performance). I am presenting pictures of artworks mentioned but also of my other artworks as a supporting material along with the text. The artworks are based on my background as a contemporary circus artist, but they are interdisciplinary works mixing art mediums. I have shifted my artistic practice toward performance art in recent years. Due to my cultural background, the focus is on awkwardness in Western culture.

I chose to discover awkwardness because of the pure enjoyment and the thrilling full-on inspiration I get from the topic. I love awkwardness because it is at the same time painful and hilarious. It is full of contrasts and extremities, it includes both very up-tight expectations and moments of reliefs filled with laughter. It is at the same time very serious and then suddenly, not at all. *Awkwardness strips off the cover that we are so much holding on.*

As a supporting framework I use publications by the American political theologian and pop culture critic Adam Kotsko (1980–); the Professor Emeritus at the Tisch School of the Arts Richard Schechner (1934–) and Jacques Rancière (1940–) - the Algerian born French philosopher; as I walk the reader through my thoughts and artistic process involving awkwardness.

From Kotsko, I use his essay “Awkwardness” (2010). Kotsko divides awkwardness into three categories: radical awkwardness, cultural awkwardness, and daily life awkwardness.<sup>2</sup> Kotsko’s was the only theory of awkwardness that I found, which has any relation to the arts - not only psychological or anthropological approaches. I was planning on writing about my artworks in the light of Kotsko’s categories, but I realized I do not agree with him. So I ended up using Kotsko’s ideas rather as a springboard for my argumentation, especially in the first part of this thesis called “Defining Awkwardness”.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellis, C. *et al.* “Autoethnography: an overview”, *Historical Social Research* (2011) <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.36.2011.4.273-290>.

<sup>2</sup> Kotsko, Adam, “*Awkwardness: An Essay*”, (London: O-books, 2010), 9-10.

According to Richard Schechner: “*Performance can be seen in relation to being, doing, showing doing and explaining showing doing*”.<sup>3</sup> Out of these categories, I concentrate on “showing doing” and “explaining showing doing”. Showing doing is the act of “presenting doing something” where the action is made to be seen for an audience (on stage or exhibition space). I am “showing doing” through my artworks. Also, I am “explaining showing doing” with this written thesis. In Schechner’s terms, this means attempting to explain performance art in a textual form.

Jacques Rancière’s “The Emancipated Spectator” (2011) is relevant for this thesis in its arguments of audience behavior. Rancière analyses the individual behaviour and role of the audience, and how this has changed since theatre became more of an elitist cultural thing. Rancière writes about the passiveness of the audience regarding getting involved in the performance. I find his theory as the most relevant according to my thesis because I share his ideas about emancipating the audience, especially the idea that everyone involved with the performance should acknowledge that being a member of the audience is not a passive situation but more an active role. There are as many realities present as people and all of those individually and as collective include knowledge. Instead of passively witnessing an act, a performance can be a place for active thinking for all involved.<sup>4</sup>

Rancière’s theory is important because of my personal experience as a circus performer when I have experienced the consequences of the passiveness of the audience. After years of performing in a traditional setting of a contemporary circus I wanted to make a change for my artistic practice and started to study contemporary art. This thesis is one step along the way. Awkwardness is a functional tool for me as an artist to break the passiveness of the audience.

By performing in a contemporary circus setting I mean more theatrical setting, no more rings and animals. Contemporary circus Nouveau Cirque challenged the traditional set up of circus audiences in the late 20th century by including more theatrical elements such as narrative, dramaturgy and characters. Nouveau circus has its roots in traditional circus where the audience is seated in the dark, witnessing physical prowess demonstrated by performers on a circular stage called “ring” at the center of a large tent. This specific circular setting and its dimension finds its roots in equestrian shows presented by Philip Astley in the 18th century.<sup>5</sup> The roots of this setting are in the horse riding rings where talented soldiers were performing tricks on the back of the horse to entertain spectators.<sup>6</sup>

During the time of the new circus there have been a lot of different forms of audience setting but I agree with Rancière and want to point out that the physical change does not always mean the mental change from passive to active. In my artworks I am constantly considering the audience response and the connection between the artist. I am aiming for a mutual conversation and connection between the people involved.

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3 Schechner, Richard, *Performance Studies An Introduction*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 22.

4 Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, (London: Verso, 2011), 17-23.

5 Dominique Jando, “Philip Astley,” *Circopedia*, accessed 19th March 2020, [http://www.circopedia.org/Philip\\_Astley](http://www.circopedia.org/Philip_Astley).

6 Hirn, Sven, *Sirkus kiertää Suomea*, (Tampere: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden seura 1982), 21.



With awkwardness the set up for a passive audience that maintains learnt habits, expectations and assumptions are possible to break. In the current context, to mention an example there are a set of expectations regarding what the female body *should* look like: toned and thin. These norms are presently accepted by the entire milieu: artists themselves, coaches and audience members seem to view them as an evidence. The audience applauds, blind to the fact that there can be a person on stage who is physically and mentally hurt because of the pressure of fitting into these expectations. Awkwardness is all about narrow social expectations and *rules* where people are desperately placing others and trying to fit in themselves. The expectations towards a body shape on stage can be seen as a mini version of society where certain goals, for beauty standards are desired, but the passiveness of the audience (or members of the society) prevent change from happening. I find that awkwardness is a good tool for the emancipation of the passive audience, because it disrupts the dominant norms of behaviour.

These are some of the ideas behind the artworks that I discuss in this thesis. The artworks are not only performances but can be seen as research methods. This thesis is a symbiotic product of performance and written thoughts, in which I try to include the knowledge that is only present in the performance's *moment of action*. By this I mean the moment of performance where the history, future and present moment of the performer and the audience are combined. This situation cannot be reconstructed fully by writing because the text is always written by a certain person at a certain time, which is different from the one where performance happened. In this text I will write about what I did in my artworks in retrospect, admitting the impossibility of this. Instead of a specific research question, I focus on exploring awkwardness as a tool in my artistic projects.

## Awkwardness in my artistic practice

As a solution for being frustrated with the assumptions and limitations related to performing in a circus context, I wanted to take my artistic practice out from the circus bubble and started working interdisciplinary in different contexts such as exhibition spaces and site-specific works. Some of the artworks are still going on and some will be presented again after this thesis has been submitted. I see the artistic practice as an ongoing, constantly changing process so this text is a description of a process that will go on for a long time.

Artworks are a constant discussion between the artist and the surrounding society, the works are never separated from the artist's history, background or previous knowledge. It is impossible to point out the beginning or the ending of the process because the artwork is always in relation to its surroundings that are changing constantly. I write about the artworks as follows: first, about the moment of the artist coming up with the idea; then making it to the action of performance or artwork physically happening; the last step is what consequences the work had – limited to my own experiences and observations.

First I will introduce *Living like there is no tomorrow* (2019) a video installation that is exhibiting moments where the artist is spinning the plastic tube, which is also known as a “hula-hoop”, around the body in monumental landscapes around the world. The installation is inspired by the paradox of Western individuals' lifestyles, self-help books, and climate change. Awkwardness springs from the contradictions of expectations of life, trying to achieve everything but not getting anywhere, values conflicting with flying, in addition to the contrast between social expectations and the individual's reality.

Secondly, I will write about *The Artist Talk* (2018), a performance that bases a lot on Jacques Rancière's ideas of the emancipation of the audience. The performance takes the form of a lecture but eventually, it turns out the lecture is something totally different than expected. It grabs onto our society's power relationships between the audience and the performer.

The third artwork is *Donna Drive* (2020), a virtual pseudonym publishing texts online. Through *Donna Drive* I express the awkwardness that comes from gender inequalities and cultural differences. Cultural awkwardness is one of the three types of awkwardness by Adam Kotsko. The process of *Donna Drive* is still going on. I am writing this thesis during the time of the Corona-virus outbreak so just recently *Donna Drive* escalated to a live-stream performance. I will also scratch the surface about the awkwardness related to a mashup with virtual and real life.

I have not consciously decided to create awkward artworks on purpose (except in the case *The Artist Talk*). As I started investigating this subject with more attention for my master thesis I noticed that awkwardness had been present in my artistic work all along. Intrigued, I set out to investigate more occurrences of this notion in other artistic practices. This realisation that awkwardness is one of the main ingredients in my artworks has given more depth to my art practice.

Awkwardness fascinates me because I am inspired by contrasts. My artistic practice explores the topics of joy, enthusiasm, and humor combined with darker, even devastating topics such as inequality. I believe humor makes hard issues easier to digest, and that is where awkwardness comes in. Confronting and handling awkward situations somehow fits my personality. As an artist, I am very straightforward and determined, not scared of tough situations, embarrassment, or debate. I am very much enjoying the creation work but I also understand that this might raise uncomfortable feelings.

Awkwardness suits my intentions because I am regularly outraged at some social phenomenons and previously felt too shamed, shy or insecure to speak up. I get infuriated when I witness behaviors that are immoral but socially accepted. Through awkwardness I have found ways to respond to those situations. Deep down behind my practice are the hidden aims to challenge societal structures. My artworks are proposals for alternative ways of being for sometimes so narrow realities that prevent us from living our lives as fully as we could. Before going deep into the three awkward artworks I am going to define awkwardness as a word.



# What could awkwardness mean?

## Embarrassment

The definition from the Cambridge Dictionary for awkwardness is: “*Embarrassment, or a situation that is difficult and not relaxed, a quality of not being natural, relaxed, or attractive*”.<sup>7</sup> The definition is interesting because it includes a claim that awkwardness is difficult and not relaxed, but it does not include the possibility that it could be the opposite. In my opinion, awkwardness can be a positive situation.

I would add to the definition that awkwardness depends on the situation, the timing, and the person’s previous life experiences and personal history. Keeping in mind that the density of the awkward sensation varies or can be vanished totally when a person is alone in the situation compared when a person is in the middle of a social situation. Awkwardness is related to social behavior and assumptions of how social situations should be.

It is impossible to define what is awkward for another person because it depends on their own history and past events that only the experiencer is familiar with. Something that is awkward for one, can be relaxing and easy for another. For example, when I moved out of Tokyo, I decided to sell my bike, and a friend accompanied me to the meeting point of the transaction at Koenji Station. I felt very awkward, because I had to meet the bike buyer, but my friend considered the situation as a nice evening walk. I realized how different the experiences of awkwardness can be even for people who have a lot in common and know each other as well as we do. Awkwardness is highly related to the details of one’s history what comes to the cultural and socio-economic background.

First, it was hard to tell why exactly the situation was awkward but after a while of thinking, it clarified that one cause was because of receiving money from a stranger. This is clearly related to my cultural background as a Finn. In Finland talking about money especially with strangers is awkward.<sup>8</sup> It is an unwritten rule in Finnish culture to try to avoid talking about money, for example, asking the amount of one’s salary can be seen a bit rude (even though it could be helpful in some situations for example what comes to the differences in salaries). It is hard to point out one clear beginning for this money related awkwardness that lie far back in history. The one cause might be the taxes and the division related to land ownership during 1500 Finland.<sup>9</sup> The taxing and land were divided by the farmers according to their already existing wealth. The division was not always fair. In the near history in 1990, there was a financial crisis in Finland and class differences increased that might have its causes for this. Talking about money was awkward in both situations if you had or if you did not have money

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7 “Awkwardness,” Cambridge Dictionary, accessed December 27, 2019, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/awkwardness>

8 Thüren Julia, “Hinnan kysyminen hävettää, palkoista vaietaan... Rahasta kannattaa puhua, vaikka se onkin kiusallista!,” *YLE*, October 25, 2018, <https://yle.fi/aihe/artikkeli/2018/10/25/raha-asioihin-suhtaudutaan-kuin-ves-sajuttuihin-mika-tekee-rahasta-puhumisesta>.

9 See also: Suvianna Seppälä, “*Viljana, nahkoina, kapakalana*,” Hakapaino Oy, Helsinki 2009, <https://www.utupub.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/46918/diss2009seppala.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.



so the people tried to avoid the conversations. The reason for awkwardness can rely on deep in the cultural history. Being awkward with discussions considering money is something you might not know if you are not familiar with the Finnish culture.

The definition of awkwardness from the Cambridge Dictionary makes sense when thinking about it as an individual feeling that comes up in certain situations. In different periods of time different things are awkward. I am writing this during the COVID-19 outbreak and suddenly buying toilet paper became awkward.<sup>10</sup> Awkwardness is a feeling in certain situations that is connected largely with the period that we are living in. The causes for awkwardness can change rapidly and unpredictable, such as the case with toilet paper.

Likewise, awkwardness is connected with a smaller scale of time: the duration of the moment. An ordinary situation can become awkward very suddenly if the duration of an normal action is too long. Think about the situation when hugging someone as a sign of goodbye and the other person hugs by accident *just a little bit too long*. Fortunately, the moment of awkwardness lasts for a certain amount of time and after that, it is gone. Even the memory of awkwardness is its own moment of feeling in a certain time. The feeling that awkwardness can cause afterward is not the same as the actual situation that caused it.

Because the reason for awkwardness is remarkably hard to define and point out, I started to think if we could find the very beginning of awkward feelings but that is also hard to point out. The beginning for the action that leads to awkwardness can be deliberate, or just a random coincidence. For example, provocative behaviour - like teenagers talking back to their parents - could be seen as being deliberately awkward, and tripping over in public because you were not paying attention, could be a random awkward coincidence. Above all, awkwardness seems to be a very flexible word.

To be able to understand awkwardness it is important to internalize the presence of different realities present in the awkward moment. The previously mentioned bike-selling example included three people. That is three *different realities* of which we know that one was definitely awkward (myself), one was not at all awkward (my friend), and one we do not know about (the buyer). Timewise for me the awkwardness of the situation started before confronting the buyer, because I was nervous about the upcoming situation. After the bike and the money had changed hands, I was relieved because the situation was over. I do not know whether it was awkward for the buyer or not and if it was, when did the awkwardness end. Now, when I think back, I can still feel the awkwardness but also the relief that the moment is gone, which is another layer in the awkwardness caused by my personal characteristics and the situation combined - not the actual situation or action anymore.

At the end of the bike situation my friend told me she thinks it's awkward to ride a bike in public. I did not relate. I like biking. I find this an perfect example of individual relation to awkwardness.

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, Kiona N, "This is why everyone is hoarding toilet paper", Ars Technica, March 24, 2020, <https://ars-technica.com/science/2020/03/this-is-why-everyone-is-hoarding-toilet-paper/>.

## Going the wrong way

The origins of awkwardness regarding the Collins English Dictionary are “going to the wrong way”:

*“1300–50; Middle English, equivalent to awk(e), auk(e) ‘backhanded’, Old English \*afoc (< Old Norse ofugr ‘turned the wrong way’; cognate with Old Saxon, Old High German abuh, Old English afu(h)lic ‘wrong’, off) + -ward -ward”.*<sup>11</sup>

This is the core of my artistic practice: to go gently to the wrong way on purpose. By writing this thesis I realized that I am constantly finding ways to disrupt the prevalent reality and habits of people around me. This became especially clear when I was working on the artwork *Donna Drive* (2020). I realized I was constantly looking to do things others did not. I will go into more depth about the process of *Donna Drive* later on in this thesis.

I find the origin of awkwardness interesting, because it proposes a universal truth, *a right* way of doing and being or how things should be thinking with “common sense” or learned habits. It includes social assumptions and an awareness of certain rules. I think the definition can be placed in any social environment regardless of the culture, but the “right way” changes. Social circumstances determine this “right way”, and it becomes common knowledge. How did these rules appear and why do we think they are right?

Doing something “in a wrong way” raises questions about “the right way” as Adam Kotsko states; “*One might say provisionally that awkward is wrong-ward, but then what is the corresponding right-ward?*”<sup>12</sup> Breaking the social norm in the name of awkwardness is not illegal. The punishment is social embarrassment, even a social rejection. The rejection can lead even to the isolation of a social group.

Physical or mental disorders are linked to awkwardness because of the unexpected behavior they present.<sup>13</sup> That is not the fault of the one who has the disorder, but their surroundings which are not flexible enough to understand people with various profiles of mental health. Social situations could be more bearable for people with different abilities if society would be more immune to awkwardness. Hypothetically, *awkwardness might not even exist* if there were no stigmas like this and rules of what is socially accepted behavior.

I am aware that I am writing from a very privileged point of view. For example, I can not pretend to understand the experiences of disabled people and how they feel in regard to awkwardness in social situations or awkwardness in movement. I also cannot fully understand other cultures and how awkwardness feels or presents itself within them.

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<sup>11</sup> “Awkward,” Collins English Dictionary, accessed December 3rd, 2019, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/un-awkward>.

<sup>12</sup> Kotsko, 2010, 9.

<sup>13</sup> “Social Anxiety Disorder is more than just shyness,” National Institute of Mental Health, accessed Jan 17th, 2020, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/social-anxiety-disorder-more-than-just-shyness/index.shtml>.





Photo: PEN performance, Mitäsmittäsmittä-festival Iida-Liina Linnea (2019)

Who then decides what is awkward? It is related to social hierarchies and social standards. Someone shouting “Awkward!” in a situation is a familiar phrase - nowadays well-known from movies, TV series, Instagram, and daily-life. Awkwardness has become a trend and the amount of awkward series and movies has been increasing in the 21st century.<sup>14</sup> There is an abundance of popular culture that I also consumed to understand more of the topic, such as *The Office*, *Borat*, *The Fleabag*, and *Miranda*. Those TV-series use awkwardness as a tool in comedy, but also as a way to comment on political issues effectively. One could argue that popular culture has a strong impact on what we think is awkward. The same goes for social media, and the collective mind deems trending at a certain time. There seems not to be an unequivocal reason why awkwardness is a trend. Would it have something to do with social media and that the daily-life issues have become public because of Instagram and Insta Stories? Or perhaps getting attention with awkward content is one of the causes of the trend?

<sup>14</sup> Alhart, Valerie, “New book explores awkward moments in film and media,” University of Rochester, May 25, 2014. <https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/new-book-explores-awkward-moments-in-film-and-media/>.



# Feeling Awkward

Above all awkwardness is a feeling, without common causes for it. Kotsko writes that awkwardness is not about the individual but more about social structures and manners and how people react to them. When I think about my experience while performing and dealing with awkwardness in my own artistic work, I agree with Kotsko that an individual can not be awkward but the situation can be.<sup>15</sup> The individual in the situation has a lot of power to choose how to react to, and how to deal with the awkwardness. This includes issues that are not awkward on purpose.

Feeling awkward has a lot to do with social behavior. I will introduce *the fundamental attribution error*,<sup>16</sup> which I think is especially related to understanding the awkward feeling. Fundamental attribution error means over-emphasizing own behavior and under-emphasizing other's actions. For example, if someone cuts in front of you in a queue, you can automatically think the person is disrespectful, but if you were to do the same, you would justify the act by a rational cause of hurry not by you behaving badly. The fundamental attribution error becomes evident in awkward situations because awkwardness is an inner feeling like this. Feeling awkward is in the person who thinks the situation is awkward, not in the one towards whom they feel it - like in the fundamental attribution error. Like Kotsko claims, individuals can not be blamed for awkward situations. There are no awkward individuals but there are learned manners and behaviors judging an individual's actions.<sup>17</sup> If we can give examples of dismantling the fundamental attribution problem in artworks, it can leak into society and affect how one will see the situation next time they get cut in a queue.



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<sup>15</sup> Kotsko, 2010, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Shadd Maruna, Ruth E. Mann, "A fundamental attribution error? Rethinking cognitive distortions," The British Psychological Society: Texas, 2006. [http://www.communicationcache.com/uploads/1/0/8/8/10887248/a\\_fundamental\\_attribution\\_error-\\_rethinking\\_cognitive\\_distortions.pdf](http://www.communicationcache.com/uploads/1/0/8/8/10887248/a_fundamental_attribution_error-_rethinking_cognitive_distortions.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Kotsko, 2010, 9.



## Why is a circus performance so awkward?

I personally think performing is one of the most awkward situations in life, even though I am a professional performer. The awkwardness of performing does not necessarily never end, but it is possible to find ways to deal with the awkward feeling while performing. The awkwardness for myself comes from the situation where I am placing myself in front of the others so that they have to watch me. This is the question that I have been thinking a lot. Why am I placing myself there, why am I taking the time from the others? Is my performance really so important? The audience presence is one of the essential aspects of performance. Would there be a performance without the audience? Especially performing circus tricks feels awkward when there is a certain physical skill that a person is capable of doing and others are watching. *The trick of the trick* is that most of the people in the audience can not do the trick. If they could, would the trick exist?

Circus performances can be especially awkward because they are based on a skill that one shows off on a stage, while others sit and watch. The situation can be based on a presumption that a performer is able to present a physical skill, that the majority of people are not able to do. This can lead to a hierarchical situation that causes a sense of inequality among people, even without them noticing it. These situations that are constructed in an unequal way are awkward.

On the other hand, circus has its roots in the freak shows, where people with special characteristics were placed on a stage as curiosities.<sup>18</sup> So circus has history with including differenties on stages, but still, not as equal performers but as curiosities. Nowadays freak shows have changed their nature a lot and this is not the case anymore but history still exists.

In contemporary circus one of the aspects of the glamour can be based on that a circus performer shows off a difficult physical skill and a muscular and lean body image. An individual among the audience can think that this is a goal in life, and so feels inferior. Our current society is partly based on this, causing unhealthy coping mechanisms. For example it is a physical requirement for aerial acrobats to have good abs to be able to do the tricks in a safe way. The reason for abs is the physical demands, not necessarily the esthetic. The circus performer is often seen on stage in peekaboo clothing. The physical need for extremely big muscles is probably not the case for everyone in the audience, so is it necessary to show off the abs so that can become unrelatable? The same structure can also be seen in the models in an advertisement, actors in cinema, and so on.<sup>19</sup> By recognizing what we assume being normal and shaking that on purpose, the stages, media, screen times, etc. could be more accessible for everyone, not only the ones fulfilling this very narrow idea of a normal muscular body.

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<sup>18</sup> See also: Robert Bogdan, "Presenting human oddities for amusement and profit," *The University of Chicago Press books*, 1990, <https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/F/bo5974359.html>.

<sup>19</sup> See also: Hyde, Janet Shibley, Grabe, Shelly, Ward, Monique L., "The Role of the Media in Body Image Concerns Among Women: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental and Correlational Studies" *American Psychological Association*, 2008. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5259131\\_The\\_Role\\_of\\_the\\_Media\\_in\\_Body\\_Image\\_Concerns\\_Among\\_Women\\_A\\_Meta-Analysis\\_of\\_Experimental\\_and\\_Correlational\\_Studies](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5259131_The_Role_of_the_Media_in_Body_Image_Concerns_Among_Women_A_Meta-Analysis_of_Experimental_and_Correlational_Studies).



Photo: Lauri Elstelä, Recover Laboratory Pyhimys Concert tour, Tampere-talo, (2019)

Understanding that there are as many realities present as people and those realities encountering the existing realities are actually forming new unseen realities. The beauty of a performance situation is that the newborn realities exist only for the time that the performance is going on. By this I mean a situation where there is a member of the audience witnessing a performance, the performer and the member of the audience have their own realities and perspectives of the ongoing moment. In unpredictable moments a memory from the audience member can rise up because the performer is presenting an action. The memory together with the performer's action is forming a new reality, only present at that moment. We can guess what kind of realities there will be but it is more likely coincidences. This is relevant to understand what comes to the emancipation of the audience according to Ranciere (2008). The scenario makes sense also in daily-life situations when we, for example, meet up a stranger in a supermarket. In the supermarket, the context is not a performance context so we do not think that as a performance as we do in a black box. Remember the bike-situation from before? That is an example of how similar to each other daily life awkwardness and performing awkwardness are and how the realities present are different from each other.

A performer can try to know their audience, but it is impossible to understand all the personal details and stories that audience members have. Just like I could not know the realities of the bike buyer - or that my friend thought it would be so much more awkward to ride a bike than sell one. The Italian performance artist Andrea Pagnes makes the same interesting point about the individuality of a person: according to Pagnes, the body, the soul, the movement, and perception are proofs of different realities present at the same moment.<sup>20</sup> This ties together daily life awkwardness and performing awkwardness I am writing about, combining the ideas in Kotsko's theory of awkwardness and my own ideas.

<sup>20</sup> See also: Andrea Pagnes, "Body Issues in Performance Art: Between Theory and Praxis," Academia, accessed Jan 20th, 2020, [https://www.academia.edu/8716269/Body\\_Issues\\_in\\_Performance\\_Art\\_Between\\_Theory\\_and\\_Praxis](https://www.academia.edu/8716269/Body_Issues_in_Performance_Art_Between_Theory_and_Praxis).



Photo: Training aerial chains, screenshot (2013)

## What happens in our bodies while being awkward?

Awkwardness is a mental state but it can lead to a physical reaction too. Breaking the social standard can be stressful for the body and that can cause different kinds of sensations in our bodies. Feeling rejection in a social situation, for example when breaking a social rule by accident and being rejected because of that, can be physically painful. According to a research article by PNAS (Proceeding of the National Academy of Sciences of United States of America): *“Results give new meaning to the idea that rejection “hurts.” They demonstrate that rejection and physical pain are similar not only in that they are both distressing—they share a common somatosensory representation as well.”*<sup>21</sup> The research claims that mental rejection does not only feel distressing in a similar way as physical pain does, but the two also share actual physical reactions in the body. The somatosensory system is the sensory system that receives, for example, the sensations of touch and movement. It includes muscles, joints, skin, and fascia.<sup>22</sup>

The fight or flight system, the human tendency to run away from the situation or brace oneself and face it head-on, can be activated in a moment of awkwardness: one’s blood pressure rises, breathing gets heavier, butterflies swarm in the stomach. Fighting against these feelings can make the situation even worse. This is the primitive stress reaction to a physical threat that activates our autonomic nervous system. It is possible to control the physical reaction by training, which leads to being able to diminish the mental feeling of awkwardness.

21 Kross Ethan, Berman Marc G., Mischel Walter, Smith Edward E., Wager Tor D, “ Social rejection shares somatosensory representations with physical pain,” Proceeding of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 22 February 2011, <https://www.pnas.org/content/108/15/6270>.

22 Nida Gleveckas-Martens, “Somatosensory System Anatomy,” Medscape, 2013, <https://emedicine.medscape.com/article/1948621-overview>.



## Can the tolerance for awkwardness be trained physically?

The research on physical and mental discomfort, which has found that challenging social situations activate the same area in our brain as being physically hurt does<sup>23</sup>, is interesting when it comes to my topic. As I mentioned previously, my practice finds its roots in acrobatic arts. Circus training is physically very demanding, and it requires a tolerance for physical pain. Thinking back on it now, I believe that it was, in part, the physical training that made me more tolerant of all kinds of discomfort, possibly leading to my artistic practice on awkwardness. I realized that uncomfortable situations are not harmful but quite the opposite.

My main disciplines in the circus context were hoop manipulation and aerial acrobatics with aerial chains (two metal chains in a loop). The chains are used for climbing and acrobatic movements, including drops where the whole body weight is dropped to hang from a certain part of the body. The training itself is physically very painful, and it is one of the aspects that makes the discipline so spectacular. I think that the training to get out of awkwardness feels similar. It has a lot to do with resistance and tolerance. Training aerial chains start with a small amount of physical pain that is increased slowly while the body is getting used to the pain. As the training went on, I got used to the pain of chains little by little, until it did not feel like pain anymore: the body became numb in certain parts. This type of training is based on slowly stretching the limits to gain more tolerance and endurance, which I think can be applied to both: awkwardness and physical pain. Circus training often, if not always, includes facing discomfort. It includes climbing to high places, being upside down, stretching splits, facing the fear of the ever-present possibility of failing the trick, and being injured. Almost everything in circus training has something to do with discomfort and adapting to extreme situations.

On the other hand, circus training is extremely fun. It makes the practitioner happy – it is not and should not be all pain. The enjoyment of the training is the reason why discomfort does not actually feel only bad, but instead can turn into a successful feeling. Through training, developing and positive feedback, it is possible to get stronger not only physically but mentally as well. The experience of success after pain can be typical for circus training. Performing in front of the audience, and being comfortable with everyone watching performances, is facing discomfort. Applause after a performance makes the performer and the performance feel socially accepted. This leads to a self-esteem boost.

As mentioned before, training circus made me more tolerant for handling awkward situations. Because of the positive experiences of challenging situations I am more capable of using those moments and that mental state as my artistic method. For example, talking to a stranger can be awkward in the context of Finnish culture. I decided to use this as a core in my performance *PEN*. The performance starts as a very awkward situation, and then leads to strangers talking to each other. The start is awkward on purpose, and as a performer I manage to handle the awkwardness and eventually transform it into social relief. Almost like a joke, but not quite.

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23 Kross, “Social rejection shares somatosensory,”.

Educator and circus artist Lacy Alana describes the mental side of circus training very well in the following list:

*“1. Circus provides us with a unique opportunity to expand our window of tolerance by providing us with safe and progressive opportunities to practice shifting between states. In circus, we’re faced with the physiological and emotional impact (arousal) of encountering activities that can feel scary or initially out of reach. As we ultimately find mastery of these skills within a safe and supportive context, we experience regulation and a physiological and emotional return to calm. This provides our bodies with an opportunity to “practice” moving between states in a safe way, and ultimately expands our window of tolerance.*

*2. Circus is fun, which makes this process of learning and growth satisfying and reinforcing in a way that isn’t always inherent when we’re doing work to move outside of our “nervous system comfort zone.” This enjoyment allows us to tolerate pushing through the uncomfortable states that we may encounter as we move ourselves beyond our current window of tolerance.*

*3. While we generally don’t approach circus with this goal in mind, it inherently offers many tools that help us to regulate our nervous system and effectively learn to toggle from arousal/dysregulation back to a state of calm.”<sup>24</sup>*



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<sup>24</sup> Lacy Alana, “Circus as a Healing Art: What Polyvagal Theory Teaches Us About Why Circus” Works, “*Circus Talk* (Nov 2019), <https://circustalk.com/news/circus-as-a-healing-art-what-polyvagal-theory-teaches-us-about-why-circus-works>.



## Greetings from Finland: *Myötähäpeä* - The Second-Hand Embarrassment

I will introduce a very Finnish thing called “*myötähäpeä*”. I will get to it by first mentioning oxytocin – the “love hormone”. Oxytocin modulates social feelings, social bonding and belonging but also anxiety and fear.<sup>25</sup> Oxytocin is the hormone that makes us better at understanding others. This hormone helps us in awkward situations, but it can also make them worse because of the *empathy* that rises up and makes us ashamed *for* the other.

In Finnish, there is a word for being ashamed for someone else: “*myötähäpeä*”. It does not translate into English. It refers to a type of “second-hand embarrassment”, the situation when one feels awkward or embarrassed for another person. That awkwardness comes from witnessing a situation and being a part of it unintentionally, but not being the cause for it. Second-hand embarrassment is more likely to arise in awkward situations. The high level of oxytocin was found both in the moments of bonding but also moments of social stress for example when someone is ashamed. Oxytocin and cortisol levels tend to rise also when a person is separated from others. Social rejection causes this rise.<sup>26</sup>

Let me offer an example of second-hand embarrassment: I attended a lecture in Aalto-University, and our professor had invited an artist to give a presentation. The presentation was pathetic, embarrassing, and not at all motivating: the opposite of what it was supposed to be. The artist was clearly disappointed in his career and hated his artworks. During the presentation, I could see our professor having feelings of second-hand embarrassment. She was trying hard to make the situation better by asking supporting questions to the artist. The situation got even worse: the artist kept complaining even more. This led to a very awkward second-hand embarrassment spreading among the students witnessing the situation. On a side-note: This situation was one of the inspiring situations for my artwork *The Artist Talk* that I will write about more about later on.

This lecture stuck on the memory of the students. People often tend to remember negative memories better than positive ones because of a reason called the *negativity bias*.<sup>27</sup> Shortly it means remembering the negative instead of the positive or neutral situation. That is why awkward situations are stuck in people’s heads. Going over and over a social situation is a natural consequence. In this scenario, there is potential to make artworks that are remembered and this has been the case with many artists. I want to point out that this is a very complex topic because on the other side this might lead to the intentional shocking in artworks that does necessarily not lead to a positive outcome. Because of the negativity bias, people tend to remember and gossip about negative memories even though it might have combined a moment of relief.

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25 Tori DeAngelis, “The two faces of oxytocin,” *American Psychological Association* (February 2008) <https://www.apa.org/monitor/feb08/oxytocin>.

26 DeAngelis, “The two,”.

27 Margaret Jaworski, “The Negativity Bias: Why the Bad Stuff Sticks,” *Psychom*, (May 2019) <https://www.psychom.net/negativity-bias>.

## What is performance?

Nina Felshin describes performance in her published book *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* as a cross-disciplinary hybrid with great potential to involve the audience. She writes that performance is aesthetically open as an art form.<sup>28</sup> Currently, this definition resonates with my artistic practice, as I am constantly shifting between artistic disciplines. Often my performances rely on physicality in the circus but include other art forms too.

Richard Schechner introduces the fan of performances in *Performance Theory*. The fan of performance consists of rites, ceremonies, shamanism, eruption and resolution of the crisis, performance in everyday life, sports entertainments, play, art-making process, and ritualization.<sup>29</sup> I agree with Schechner that performance can be any interaction between humans if the situation is considered as performance. Right now, I'm in a daily-life situation that could be considered as a performance if wanted. It is a very pleasant performance with my friends. We are sitting outside talking and I am writing this text, and someone just turned on the lights because the sun is setting. The setting can be seen as a performance. When we leave the situation our lines will probably be: "thank you, good night". There will not be any applause after the situation is over. The context defines if a situation is a performance or is just another daily-life situation.

How I understand Schechner, is that all the encounters between humans can be seen as performances from daily-life greetings to huge stage shows. In this thesis I exclude the daily-life experiences but they are strongly present in thoughts behind the performances. In this thesis, by performance, I mean an event that is prepared to be seen by an audience. The amount of the audience varies, and the audience is both in a live situation, and in a virtual situation.

According to Schechner "*In the arts to perform is to put on a show, a play, a dance, a concert. In everyday life to perform is to show off, to go to extremes, to underline an action for those who are watching*".<sup>30</sup> According to this, I am writing in the art context about "to perform". Schechner argues that performance is something that can be practiced. It can be a show or something you repeat in daily-life. Let's take a career as an example. It is common knowledge to know what happens at the doctor's office when the patient goes in, and both parties act accordingly: this interaction can be seen as a performance.<sup>31</sup> It does not still mean it *is* a performance. People tend to perform their careers.<sup>32</sup>

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28 Nina Felshin, *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* (Bay Press: 1995), 17.

29 Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 17.

30 Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies An Introduction*, (New York: Routledge: 2002), 22.

31 Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 23.

32 See also: Jaana Parviainen, "Luonnollinen ihminen ja työelämän performatiivisuus," *Aikalainen* 2010, <https://aikalainen.uta.fi/2010/10/20/luonnollinen-ihminen-ja-tyoelaman-performatiivisuus/>.





# THE CHOCOLATE HOOP

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## RECOVER LABORATORY

*Photo: Sofi Häkkinen, Recover Laboratory - the Chocolate hoop performance (2018)*  
*This photo is for inspiration for discovering awkwardness.*

### Discovering awkwardness

Adam Kotsko explains that he tried to take distance to awkwardness by exploring awkwardness from the screen. Kotsko tried to stay objective by not placing himself physically in an awkward situation in order to be able to focus only on the theory of awkwardness. As a research method he decided to watch DVD:s at home and observe the situation from outside instead of being involved.<sup>33</sup>

I criticize his research sources because I think the content of sources were too narrow. The films he mentioned were such as Borat, Curb your Enthusiasm, The Office, Terrible Hangover, 40-years and Virgin. The sources are limited to films that do not include directors with different backgrounds. The sources do not include other perspectives but the dominant western, masculine perspective. For the intentions for this thesis, it would have been more efficient to have sources that consider artists, artworks and perspectives from other cultures with more widen time scale.

Remember the defining awkwardness earlier? Witnessing awkwardness through a screen from a couch can be more likely a comfortable situation instead of uncomfortable. In this sense, awkwardness can be a form of entertainment instead of an uncomfortable situation. I did the opposite of taking distance for awkward situations. Instead, I placed myself as an artist in the middle of the situations or even as a cause for awkwardness to be able to feel the awkwardness and observe the situation. Being an artist is a mask that makes it easier to go in these situations. The process of creating artworks changed the context from daily-life situations to the art context. I got out of my comfort zone for example by moving to Tokyo for exchange studies and making artworks there. Working with awkwardness included uncomfortable situations but it was also very fun and rewarding.

<sup>33</sup> Kotsko, 2010, 8.





Photo: Tuomas Lehtomaa, Screenshot of *Living like there is no tomorrow*, Finnish Independence day, (2019)

Performing awkwardness is different from daily-life-awkwardness because the performance is a planned and prepared situation. The possibility of mental preparation for awkwardness makes the situation easier, even if the performance includes improvisation and unsure aspects. In daily-life awkwardness often just happens and it is impossible to prepare. On the other hand, dealing with awkwardness and training the situations in the art context has actually made dealing with daily-life awkwardness easier. Nevertheless I believe that the *control* of awkwardness in the performance situations makes it easier to digest which I will write about more later on.

Daily-life and art practicing seems to mix up. After I started writing this thesis I realised more and more how awkwardness was an important factor in my work but also part of my daily-life. A situation that I put myself into could be for example spinning a hoop in a laconic way in the middle of crowds. The awkwardness is often an inner feeling and it is not so obvious for the others watching. For example by doing the hoop spinning in public without the context of street performance, I *felt* awkward but it did not necessarily *look* awkward. While these shootings for *Living like there is no tomorrow* (2019), I encountered a guard in the airport of Helsinki while spinning the hoop in front of the departure gates. I was surprised he did not stop me and I asked what he thought I was doing. He answered “*nah, probably something art, nothing to be worried about, you can continue*”. This is an example of how an artist could have thought of doing something very special, but actually it was just another coincidence for a passerby.

This was the case during the Finnish Independence day too. I was spinning the hoop in the middle of right-wing parties demonstration in front of the polices with horses. No one said anything. Pretty awkward, no?



Screenshot of The Artist Talk Facebook event

## The three awkward artworks

### *The Artist Talk*

#### The idea

The Artist Talk was a performance inspired by bad lecturers. The performance was the final assessment of the UWAS course *Awkwardness as a site of knowledge* held in Aalto University 2018 by Pilvi Takala. The main inspiration came from a lecture by the artist mentioned before, who gave an introduction about his work, but hated his artworks. The performance The Artist Talk was performed in the form of a lecture. For 20 minutes, I was offering an artist talk using the principles I studied about awkwardness to make it as uncomfortable as possible. After I revealed it was a play and we continued to have a discussion about the situation.

A little bit about the origins of the work: During the moment of the original terrible lecture, I remember how I could feel the awkwardness spreading around the classroom as the lecture went on. I saw our professor squirming in her seat. I was thinking about the reasons why we all felt awkward during the lesson? Why was our professor feeling awkward about the artist she had invited? That case was definitely not the first one like that I was witnessing.

I wondered where did my awkwardness as a member of the audience come from? I was clearly expecting a certain kind of behavior from a public speaker. I came across my expectations and the lack of approval regarding my very narrow idea of what kind of speaker was a relevant speaker. I wanted to criticize my own expectations and create a performance that would be performed on an occasion where there would be assumptions related to the behavior for public speaking such as conferences or showcases.

The artist giving the unsuccessful lecture was showing his vulnerability and not fulfilling our expectations as a lecturer, which is understandable because he was is an artist and not a professor. His profession is to make art, not to be an amazing public speaker. According to my own experiences of artist work, it is very much required to be able to introduce your own artworks with confidence to be able to justify your artworks, which I somehow understand but do not always agree with. Why a *generally good* public speaker has to be confident, talk with superlatives, and be socially fluent? I see a relation here to the previously mentioned muscular

body shape norm related to circus performances. Where do these expectations of normality for a good speaker come from? Does it have to be like that? There are other types of behavior when we wide up the spectrum of expectations related to performing, performers, audience members, everything.

I think this is again a mini version of social structures that are actually constructed for the *normal* instead of everyone. The performance represents the structure where the assumptions of a normal artist talk are disturbed. By normal, I mean the instructions for public speaking that we learn through education such as speaking a clear, loud voice, look at the audience, be confident, etc. It is common that stages and other places made for presenting an art piece, talk, etc. are usually places supporting the ones who fit into these norms of public speaking.

We should question who we are giving space to talk, present and perform? The content can be as great, or even better in the presentations where the norms are not fulfilled. I claim that the artists and the public should be able to consider their position and the choices they are making by attending a performative event. I am proposing that if the institutions selecting the artworks, talks, other public events would take carefully more risks with expanding the idea of *normal*, even there is a chance for awkward situations there would be more variety in the performers and the content of performances. This way we could have a lot wider spectrum of performances on stages in general. If there would be more variety of different realities presented on stages that would expand the idea of *normal* behavior or normal people. Hypothetically then there would not be any more *normal*, but instead more free society where people could identify themselves more flexible in different identities and situations. By staging this I assume there would not be any more awkwardness?

The hypothesis expands from the art context to daily life. I am writing this here because I acknowledge the problem, but I understand one performance is not a solution to the problem. It is one way to point out it but it definitely does not make as much impact as I would like to. Besides this statement, I am also very much enjoying putting myself in challenging situations as an artist so making *The Artist Talk* was a very pleasurable performance.



## Action

There is an annual festival at Aalto University called *Aalto Festival* held at our university every spring. They have a compilation of artworks, lectures, presentations, workshops, etc. I applied to the festival with a fake text on an artistic talk, made by copy-pasting sentences from an old art philosophy essay of mine. The professor of the course was aware of the scam I was going for and wrote me a recommendation letter. Without any hesitation or questions, *The Artist talk* got into the festival program as a presentation. Together with the help of the professor, it was possible to reserve the biggest auditorium of Aalto University with 500 seats in it. After securing the space, I asked the Art Department of Aalto University and the Aalto Festival to be co-hosting in the Facebook event. They said yes without any questions.

I invited people through Facebook to attend *The Artist Talk*. Again, none of the invited people questioned anything - everything looked like it was just going to be an ordinary artist's talk.

*The Artist Talk* was held in the spring of 2018 in the Alvar Aalto Auditorium at Aalto University in Espoo. There were around 25 participants in the 500 seating audience. Some of them knew about the scam, but not everyone. The performance started by interrupting the previous people on the stage, who was holding a math test because they were running a bit late. (Like two minutes...)

Then the situation preceded by questioning why there were so few people in the audience, claiming that there were much more "attending" in the Facebook event. You could have touched the awkward silence floating in the air. I had collected various ways to be awkward on stage by attending awkward lectures and public speeches and observing the behavior of the speakers and the effect it had on the audience. The performance kept on going with making awkward mistakes that kept on going worse and worse when the time went on eventually escalating to an artist's nervous breakdown.

The situation was mostly improvising because a live event like that cannot be pre-scripted totally. I had prepared some tactics that I could utilize if the opportunity presented itself. Here are some of the lines and content of the performance:

*"Start by interrupting the previous event if possible. Be selfish and hurry in a situation where you do not need to hurry. Say things like "Can you please hurry up, it is my turn to set up the things". Blame the audience for something like being too few people, and not forcing their friends to come.*

*Whisper and talk too quietly and mix languages, ask from the audience basic words "here you can see umm like umm you know what is the world like so what is". Say the word in Finnish and force someone to correct your language.*

*The starting line: "Oh there are so few of you, I thought there would be more people because in the Facebook event there were more attending". Talk too quietly at times, mumble even. Mix Finnish and English, swear, never reach the actual topic of*

*the artist talk but speak beside the topic.*

*Wear an inappropriate outfit for a lecturer (I was wearing a too short tanktop and flower shorts that made me look childish and unprofessional).*

*Ask people to join your talk in some ways. (I did this by asking people if they ever tried hooping and then to come on the stage to try out spinning the hoop – no one did). Get a bit angry if no one attends. (I did). Be angry at yourself and comment on your own mistakes as you make them (why I am so dumb, why can't I do this properly, they never taught us how to use Powerpoint).*

*Talk about money and taxes. Blame society for the lack of money and time.*

*Screw up the laptop view, so that the old pictures of old lovers splash on the huge screen on top of the actual PowerPoint presentation.*

*Show terrible quotes with typos on the screen, and forget who the author is. "Sometimes I use poetry as an inspiration".*

*Try to explain the point, but can not, be angry at society and the university (actually at anyone) spread some rumors about the hosting institution. "*

These outbursts of awkwardness caused different reactions in the audience. I was performing so I can only talk from my point of view. Firstly the situation felt okay, the audience empathises with the performer because they are there and they are interested in the topic of the talk. In the beginning, it is normal to have technical problems but when it keeps repeating it becomes annoying. The situation is annoying for the public because it reveals that the artist did not rehearse or prepare enough. In other words, it feels like the talk giver is not respecting the audience and their time they are giving. The speaker seems arrogant, maybe even proud? This is not awkward, it is annoying. Sometimes the technique breaks because of unexpected problems or because of hassle the speaker causes because of being nervous or not being able to concentrate because of the nervousness.

Awkwardness in this sense is related to empathy. In awkward situations, there seems to be someone understanding the shame. This takes us back to the *myötähäpeä* - the second-hand embarrassment. In awkward situations the one feeling awkwardness has to feel and *understand* that this is awkward. Awkwardness does not exist if it is not felt by the one involved in a situation.

There is a fine line between annoying and awkward but I am pointing out that between the fine line there is empathy. It is either empathy from outside or for oneself. Empathy appears when the audience understands that the performer is ashamed or nervous. When does empathy change to anger or frustration? If the performer talks too quietly it is annoying. If the performer never gets to the point of the talk that is also annoying. Audience can feel

empathy towards the performer when they sense that the performer is insecure and is messing up because of that. People tend to feel empathy towards the ones they feel more related to.<sup>34</sup>

Performing *The Artist Talk* I knew my target audience very well: it was the university I go to, peers in the audience. I knew they would emphasize me, for a while at least. I also knew what they were expecting because I had been in an artist talk countless times before among the audience. Making the performance would not have been possible without knowing the audience, their expectations. Empathy, compassion, second-hand embarrassment, awkwardness, they are all culture related issues and it takes time to understand the smallest vibes of those.

An example of empathy in an awkward situation: In the end the performance escalated into a final breakdown that I “had” on stage, which ended up by me running out of the room. There was one person in the audience who actually ran after me when I exited dramatically the auditorium. I came back in, got up on the stage, and told everyone what was going on. The one who ran after me was the producer of our company, whom I have been working with very closely for years. After the reveal she started laughing and crying at the same time.

She had believed the artist talk to be true because the set up was so believable and afterwards she told she had to make a decision before running after me: she had to either support me in my breakdown and be ashamed by herself or she had to let me handle the situation alone and save herself from the public embarrassment. She decided to do the first option because she really thought I had lost myself but she thought she could never work with me again if that was the kind of public presentation I would do.

As a critique to the way of creating The Artis Talk I want to mention that I was not aiming for shocking the audience. This performance was in the University context and next time I would considering dropping off the “artistic breakdown”. There is danger that this kind of performance can escalate and turn into a situation where the attention is got because of the shock, not because of the content. This is something that I want to avoid in the performances.

## After

The environment and set up gave the *expected expectations* for the performance. Because of the professional look-alike Facebook event, the context of the university and Aalto Festival made the performance believable. The awkwardness consisted of the assumptions related to the expected behavior of the artist giving a public speech. I did not fill the expectations of a prepared and confident speaker as explained before.

With this performance, I wanted to test my own limits along with the ones of the milieu I was performing in. One of the hidden aims of this project was to shine a light on the great power of the performer. I also wanted to expose the procedure behind the selection of what comes to public speaking. It was fairly easy to get the possibility to present my work (this

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34 Francisco Schmidt, “Does empathy have limits?”, The Conversation, March 2, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/does-empathy-have-limits-72637>.

was in the context of the University): no one ever asked me what I was going to say or do on stage. I could have said anything politically or otherwise terrible and spread hate, for example. However, in a certain social context, one is not expected to do such things. There is very little “surveillance” of content – at least not in the Finnish university, which is a positive thing. But still, the content of a given talk can be discriminatory against some people or groups. If people would be able to deal with the awkwardness that comes from these kinds of situations and would - instead of just sitting there saying nothing - comment or interrupt the ongoing speech the situations could be much more inclusive.

Here Jacques Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator* comes in. How do we include all the realities present in the moment? Is it enough if we recognize all the realities present? How is it possible to create an active audience setting instead of passive? This comes to support once again the statement that I proposed earlier: awkwardness can be a motor of change and progress.

Pilvi Porkola, Finnish performance artist, writer, and researcher analyzes the politics of the viewer in her Ph.D. She explores Richard Sennett’s thoughts on how the behavior of the audience has changed and how the audience got used to merely witnessing the performances instead of participating in them. The change happened during the 1850s when the spontaneous behavior of the audience began to be seen as primitive, unaccepted behavior. Before this regression, the audience would openly comment on the piece during the show and show their opinions.<sup>35</sup> This is one of the key points of the thesis.

I am finding ways to shake the prevalent expected audience behaviour. I do not have a clear answer but instead, I have suggestions and tryouts. The audience itself seems to be a limited construction where people are expected to behave in certain ways for example not disturbing the performance. In *The Artist Talk*, I am pointing out that there is a *need* for the audience to react. That the reactions matter not only for the sake of the performance but also it influences what the audience will see on stage. If the audience is not reacting, the show will go on as horrible and disturbing as it is. I suggest that the content creators could consider and give more space for the audience reactions. That the reactions matter and it will have an effect how the performance continues. This is important because if a person gets a feeling that their opinion and acting matters in a performance it would be possible to reflect that experience to everyday life.

It is seen as a statement to leave in the middle of a performance. I have attended performances just last year where it was announced in the beginning that it is OK to leave if someone feels like – but still, the pressure to stay was quite tangible. How could we activate the audience as artists to express their thoughts more freely during the performances or public speeches and so on, in a way that it would not be awkward anymore, but acceptable and positive? Depending on culture but at least in my experience in Finland, it can be hard to get simple feedback on artworks, because the audience can feel distant or that they did not “get” the artwork and are afraid of saying anything and thus revealing their imagined ignorance. This is something that happens a lot in the context of gallery art: people feel awkward in the presence of art

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35 Pilvi Porkola, “Esitys tutkimuksena – näkökulmia poliittiseen, dokumentaariseen ja henkilökohtaiseen esitystaiteeseen,” *Taideyliopiston Teatterikorkeakoulu, Esittävien taiteiden tutkimuskeskus*, (Helsinki: 2014), 95. [https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/136115/Acta\\_Scenica\\_40.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/136115/Acta_Scenica_40.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

because they feel inadequate and dumb if they do not “get” it. On the other hand, the audience might just not like the artwork and the feedback will be left unsaid because of trying to avoid conflict. How could we create an atmosphere in the context of art that it is desirable to express opinions and the opinions actually matter?

While performing in *The Artist Talk*, it was essential to keep the humor present at all the time. It demanded courage to actually realize the idea of the scam. There were countless possibilities for failures. What if the audience realized it was a scam? Then the whole idea would be ruined. I realized that, as a performer, I was in the power position in the sense that I knew what was going on and I had control over it. If my acting skills were to fail, this experience would have been awkward on a whole new level: the performance of awkwardness would not have succeeded. So in this sense, I am not sure anymore if the situation was actually awkward to me or only to the audience. To be able to do this type of stunt, the performer must be solidly confident and have no second thoughts while performing. Performing awkwardness requires rigor and delicateness. If it is not spot on, then no one believes the performer. In this sense, the performance succeeded. Interestingly, I noticed that I needed to create a certain sense of control in order to be able to perform this piece: I limited the number of spectators and chose who I invited. I also had to tell one of my friends, who I knew was coming, what it actually was, because I was afraid of her reaction. So, what made it easier for me was the feeling of control and the small scale. In the future, I would like to perform *The Artist Talk* in a more realistic situation, for example, in artwork pitching or work-in-process presentations. I will try to apply for an event like this with the performance – of course as a scam. It would definitely ask for more courage and preparation.

As mentioned before having control of awkwardness makes the situation more comfortable. The experience of controlling the awkwardness in *The Artist Talk* was interesting. Was I able to do the performance because of the control? Is that actually performing awkwardness instead of being really awkward? Is there even a difference between acted awkwardness and real awkwardness? In this thesis, I am suggesting others deal with awkwardness but when I am performing awkwardness I am setting up boundaries for the awkward situation for example in *The Artist Talk* by choosing who I was inviting. There is the danger of failing but actually there is also a possibility to step back, for example, knowing that I can use it as an excuse if I am being awkward on purpose if it gets too awkward. On the other hand, using awkwardness as a tool in artworks relies a lot on my assumptions of the expected behavior of the audience so there is never actual knowledge before the moment of performing. In the performance context, the boundaries for awkwardness might be easier to set up than in a daily-life situation. I wonder how it would be possible to protect the boundaries of not getting *too awkward*? Where is the limit of *too awkward*?





Photo: Tuomas Lehtomaa, Screenshot of *Living like there is no tomorrow*, Kittilä, (2019)

## *Living like there is no tomorrow*

### Idea

*Living Live Tomorrow* is a three-channel 7-minute video installation with sound (music by artist Alekski Kinnunen and vocals by Nora Rose, written by me). It is a compilation of videos shot in different environments and landscapes where a performer is spinning a single hoop. The project is about a joyful but impossible attempt to achieve everything at the same time while not getting anywhere. It is a self-critique for Western lifestyle inspired by self-help books and constant need to be *the best version of oneself*.

On top of an individual's struggle, there is the constant worry about climate change and the inner conflict caused by that. The artwork deals with things that are in a way useless – like a plastic hoop and being a traveling artist, what circus artists traditionally are. International artists flying around in the middle of climate crisis and flight-shame<sup>36</sup>, trying to be a better person and being better for the environment, and the awkwardness one feels about still flying and doing nothing even though everyone knows it is destroying the climate.

I will present the many levels of awkwardness in this project. First of all, it felt very awkward admitting the flying around the world with a plastic tube with me for three months because of work and leisure already before making an art piece of it. I went from northern Finland all the way down to Greece, and even to the other side of the world to San Francisco.

36 Helen Coffey, "Flygskam: What is the flight-shaming environmental movement that's sweeping Europe?" *The Independent* (June 2020), [https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/flygskam-anti-flying-flight-shaming-sweden-greta-thornberg-environment-air-travel-train-brag-a8945196.html?fbclid=IwAR25A7kNA9X-Rel9nLi1gEG9HW9pgKGBwMYt-yF6JRFbGwz4uYNeq\\_FEuOBM](https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/flygskam-anti-flying-flight-shaming-sweden-greta-thornberg-environment-air-travel-train-brag-a8945196.html?fbclid=IwAR25A7kNA9X-Rel9nLi1gEG9HW9pgKGBwMYt-yF6JRFbGwz4uYNeq_FEuOBM).

Hoop as itself is a well-known children's toy that itself has a lot of contradictions. First of all, as mentioned before I prefer not to use the word "hula" because Hula is a Hawaiian dance.<sup>37</sup> I have nothing to do with hula - dance and I think it is extremely awkward that this physical art discipline that I have been training for years is actually one proof of colonialism. Hula hoop got its name from reminding the hip movement of Hawaiian dance.

The hoop became famous because of American company Wham-O. The company is known as the inventor of the hoop but according to the short documentary "*The Hula Hoop girl*" there is still debate if the Wham O company was actually just stealing the idea and making money with it.<sup>38</sup> Admittedly hoop seems to be one symbol of Western capitalism: it is a mass-produced toy, made out of plastic meant to sell as big amounts as possible. As mentioned before, a hoop is a 2-meter long piece of a plastic tube. There is not so much glamour as it might look like in a circus context when the plastic tube is covered with sparkling tape and there is a talented performer doing tricks with the hoop.

During the process of *Living Like There is No Tomorrow* I had to face my privileged situation as a Finnish citizen. I felt extremely uncomfortable because of the inequality caused by my privilege of owning a Finnish European Union passport which makes flying around the world effortless compared to other nationalities. *Inequality is awkward*. It is awkward because there seems to be no fair reason for the inequality: I have done nothing that comes to owning the privileged passport except born in Finland.

The project was made for the Occupy Earth course at Aalto University, which was about creating artworks that comment on the climate crisis. During the course the students got a last-minute opportunity to apply for traveling to New York, to visit the partner school Parsons School of Design. Because the opportunity was presented so late, there was a certain inequality between students who had a chance to even apply to participate in the trip, because not all the students could have a visa to the USA on such a short notice that was depending on their nationalities. Finnish students could. So on top of the controversy of flying to the other side of the world for a course on climate change, there was an awkward situation of different nationalities being unequal in the eyes of the U.S Immigration Office. The students understood the situation but still, it does not remove the fact that the ones with privileged passports had a better status to travel on the other side of the world. This was in the school context but I think this is directly proportional to what comes to the opportunities to have an international career and wide networks.

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37 See also: Cesily Hong, "The Power of the Hula: A Performance Text for Appropriating Identity Among First Hawaiian Youth", The University of San Francisco: 2013, <https://repository.usfca.edu/diss/56>.

38 Emily Buder, "She Was Betrayed by a Gentleman's Handshake," The Atlantic (Mar 2019), accessed 18th of April 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/585661/hula-hoop/>.

## The process and the shooting

One idea behind the shooting moment was to make a small-scale performance in the middle of a normal situation. With the action of sudden, a bit laconic, hoop spinning I was stealing attention and space from others in a public place. The filming situations in public spaces were awkward because those were drawing attention but there was not a well-known clear protocol for the behavior of the by-passers as there is for example in a situation of street performance. There was just a random person spinning the hoop in a slightly inappropriate space, not performing but also not disturbing the others. I was not taking any connection towards the by-passers even if they commented on the situation.

In addition, the situation was awkward for the one shooting the video because they had to take part in the process and sometimes the by-passers were trying to avoid going walking through the shooting place so they were bumping into the one with a camera and sometimes asking questions. For me, as a performer, the visible camera made the situation a bit easier because the camera, even if it was just a smartphone, staged a *reason* for my hoop spinning. Without the camera placed in front of me, the awkwardness would have been at the next level. In that kind of situation, there would not have been a visible reason for the spinning.

As mentioned before, doing something without a reason tends to be awkward because there are no known ways for behaviour for the people who are in the situation. Awkwardness can happen when we do not *know* what to do. A new situation can be awkward because people have to find a new way of being. I think this can happen often in an art context. Artwork can be a suggestion, a provocative statement for a different way of being.

I selected the locations in front of daily-life situations and tourist attractions in different places in the world. In front of one of the tourist attractions, I was inspired by the awkward situation when some people present assumed at first that I was going to do a street performance and they started to place themselves in front of me as an audience. After a while, those people playing audience realized I was not going to perform and lost their interest. In these moments I felt the performance had shaken the assumptions related to performing, but on reality, it just might have been extremely boring to watch and nothing else.

In addition to the tourist attractions, I shot in places where the backdrop was some beautiful scenery because I wanted the visual representation of very basic and kitschy holiday postcards and pictures posted on social media to be present in the artwork. I wanted to imitate the visuality of the holiday pictures posted on Instagram. As a contradiction to that, I shot scenes in other interesting spaces that were meant to look tempting for example in an empty tourist town on the island of Greece. The place was actually creepy because it was totally empty and abandoned during the off-season. The perfect holiday resort seemed to not exist without tourists and without people taking selfies there. In this special island, everything was wrapped in plastic as the place was on hold, waiting for the tourist to arrive again. Because of Instagram, the tourism industry has changed rapidly: instead of just visiting the destination it is at least as important or even more important to post evidence of being in a certain place.<sup>39</sup> We could argue, is that awkward or not?

<sup>39</sup> See also: Fatanti, Megasari, Suyadnya, I Wayan, "Beyond User Gaze: How Instagram Creates Tourism Destination Brand?" *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.11.145>.



## After

The feedback of the video was good. People were laughing and the work was relatable especially for the audience in similar life situations, which there were a lot as expected because the first exhibition was in the Art University context. Especially the lyrics of the soundtrack caused discussion. The majority of the audience that gave feedback was delighted by the straightforwardness of the lyrics. One feedback that I got was frustration because of one line “do you think you should have babies even if the world is overpopulated”. I acknowledge this is a complex sentence and understand why the one giving the feedback was upset. I almost deleted that sentence of the work after the discussion but decided to leave it there because my personal opinion is that it should be okay to say even the complex and hard-to-digest issues aloud. That can be a source for discussion and communication as it already did. The lyrics might be provocative, but still, I find them relevant to the period we are currently living in.

Until now the work has been presented in Helsinki and in Istanbul. The project is still going on and the next time the work will be seen in Helsinki in an exhibition in the Exhibition laboratory.

## *Lyrics of the soundtrack of Living like there is no tomorrow (2019)*

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| <i>What is your favourite body part ?</i>                            | <i>does it mean you belong where</i>    | <i>egastructure?</i>                              |
| <i>What takes your attention?</i>                                    | <i>you were born?</i>                   |   |
| <i>How do you feel desire?</i>                                       | <i>why do you travel?</i>               |   |
| <i>Do you like muscles and bendy shapes?</i>                         | <i>what's your favourite beach?</i>     | <i>how did these things collapse?</i>             |
| <i>If you couldn't feel guilty what would you do?</i>                | <i>do you like palm trees?</i>          | <i>user, interface, address, city, cloud,</i>     |
| <i>Do you think love is something that must be deserved?</i>         | <i>what do you think is ugly?</i>       | <i>earth?</i>                                     |
| <i>Would you rather know how you die or when do you die?</i>         | <i>are you ugly?</i>                    | <i>in which could are your</i>                    |
| <i>Never ending romantic love or friendship?</i>                     | <i>when?</i>                            | <i>notes and thoughts?</i>                        |
| <i>If you forget to take a condom, would you still stick it in?</i>  | <i>how?</i>                             | <i>who owns the cloud?</i>                        |
| <i>Are there enough babies in the world?</i>                         | <i>why?</i>                             | <i>google?</i>                                    |
| <i>Do you think you should have babies</i>                           | <i>who thinks you're ugly?</i>          | <i>do you storage your pictures in the cloud?</i> |
| <i>even if the world is overpopulated?</i>                           | <i>Are humans ugly?</i>                 | <i>what if you fall off from the could?</i>       |
| <i>Do you believe in diagnoses?</i>                                  | <i>Are you post-anthropocene?</i>       | <i>does it hurt?</i>                              |
| <i>Do you have one?</i>  | <i>what if all the ice next</i>         | <i>is the airplane flying through the cloud?</i>  |
| <i>Flying fast and cheap or taking the slow boat?</i>                | <i>to the ice holes</i>                 | <i>airplane or slow boat?</i>                     |
| <i>love without sex or sex without love?</i>                         | <i>melted?</i>                          | <i>earth minerals or smartphones?</i>             |
| <i>do you choose everyday?</i>                                       | <i>no more sauna and jumping</i>        | <i>metaphysical or superphysical?</i>             |
| <i>when are you ready ?</i>  | <i>into the hole?</i>                   | <i>Is there permissions in the moment</i>         |
| <i>what are you waiting for?</i>                                     | <i>Belly Button or tights?</i>          | <i>of the ultimate desire?</i>                    |
| <i>do you want it now ?</i>  | <i>who's?</i>                           | <i>can you resist?</i>                            |
| <i>what do you want now?</i>   | <i>how?</i>                             | <i>you don't?</i>                                 |
| <i>sushi or poke bowl?</i>   | <i>neoliberalism or neon colors?</i>    | <i>would you like to resist</i>                   |
| <i>did you overload your plate in buffet?</i>                        | <i>social human or physical forces?</i> | <i>your deepest desires?</i>                      |
| <i>do you take your takeaway coffee in a paper mug?</i>              | <i>Is meta maschine in process?</i>     | <i>WHY?</i>                                       |
| <i>did you leave food?</i>   | <i>is modelling informing reality?</i>  | <i>do satellites affect to your paths?</i>        |
| <i>would you like your body to be different?</i>                     | <i>How is your reality?</i>             | <i>do you use google maps?</i>                    |
| <i>how?</i>  | <i>How did it become reality?</i>       | <i>google or mcdonalds?</i>                       |
| <i>do you eat something that was alive?</i>                          | <i>Do you live on a planet?</i>         | <i>do governmental agencies</i>                   |
| <i>are you alive?</i>  | <i>how do you know?</i>                 | <i>have backdoors?</i>                            |
| <i>how do you know you're alive?</i>                                 | <i>does the planet have borders?</i>    | <i>do you have a backdoor?</i>                    |
| <i>how many orgasms have you faked?</i>                              | <i>how come if it's in the space?</i>   | <i>Is it an emotional backdoor</i>                |
| <i>when was the last time?</i>                                       | <i>whats space?</i>                     | <i>so you can escape whenever?</i>                |
| <i>was it worth it?</i>  | <i>your space?</i>                      | <i>do you have an access to urban spaces?</i>     |
| <i>So you fake love and desire rather than admit that it's gone?</i> | <i>what's the distance from</i>         | <i>who is listening to this song ?</i>            |
| <i>Can you design identity?</i>                                      | <i>here to there?</i>                   | <i>where are you?</i>                             |
| <i>What's your identity?</i>   | <i>What does distance mean?</i>         | <i>how did this voice end up here?</i>            |
| <i>do you like traveling?</i>  | <i>what is the scale?</i>               | <i>What's your IP address?</i>                    |
| <i>where would you like to go next?</i>                              | <i>are you married because</i>          | <i>Do you understand political articulation?</i>  |
| <i>Are you satisfied with your passport</i>                          | <i>you're expected to?</i>              | <i>Where is your money?</i>                       |
| <i>picture of ashamed of it?</i>                                     | <i>Tinder or speed dating?</i>          | <i>Do you like spending money?</i>                |
| <i>How is your passport?</i>   | <i>did you cheat on your partner?</i>   | <i>For what?</i>                                  |
| <i>Do you deserve the passport you have?</i>                         | <i>you loved it?</i>                    | <i>Hdmi or vga?</i>                               |
| <i>Are there borders?</i>  | <i>Does your skin shiver</i>            | <i>Playstation or nintendo?</i>                   |
| <i>where are the borders?</i>  | <i>because of that?</i>                 | <i>Interface or borderline?</i>                   |
| <i>how do the borders effect to your life?</i>                       | <i>How do you feel afterwards?</i>      | <i>Do you have access to reality?</i>             |
| <i>where is the border of yourself?</i>                              | <i>Loving attention?</i>                | <i>What is a problem space?</i>                   |
| <i>where does your body belong?</i>                                  | <i>urban software or urban home?</i>    | <i>Are you familiar with the space?</i>           |
| <i>is your body somewhere in someone's physical territory ?</i>      | <i>city design or accidental</i>        | <i>How does the voice inside</i>                  |
| <i>do you belong where you are?</i>                                  | <i>m</i>                                | <i>of your head sound like?</i>                   |

WENT TO AN ILLEGAL TECHNO PARTY  
 THAT WAS STOPPED BY LAPD  
 WENT BACK HOME AND CRIED EVERY SUNDAY  
 GOT ENGAGED  
 AND MADE A NEW FAKE ACCOUNT  
 GOT SO ANXIOUS THAT I DELETED ALL MY SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS  
 TEXTED YOU IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT AND DELETED THE MESSAGES AND AFTER THIS

*Screenshot of Donna Drive publications (2019)*

## ***Donna Drive***

### **Idea**

*Donna Drive* (originally named as *Rosalita*) is a media art installation created first in the context of the exhibition at Tama Art University in Tokyo in 2019. During spring 2020 it escalated to a participatory live-stream performance even though the piece was originally meant to be presented in a gallery.

*“Do you know that one iPhone that is left to charge in a random power outlet in public. You can not help yourself, your eyes shift to the screen when a preview of a message pops up. That is Donna’s iPhone. Through the phone, you can enter Donna’s life: her Google Drive, Instagram, photos, everything. Donna publishes the texts you did not dare.”*

Donna is a fictional made-up character. She publishes things that are left unsaid or left hanging in the air. Donna is a writer and her texts are published in her Google Drive folders. Some of the texts are written by me, some are collected from people and some are written together with the participants during the live-stream performance. The project started by asking my Instagram followers to send drafts of messages from their phones. I got plenty of answers and those formed the first publication accessible in one of the Google Drive folders on Donna’s iPhone. After a while I started to collect more texts from people with a certain personal topic, for example, *“Things that I did to not be in love”* and still the collection is going on.

## Background and context

*Donna Drive* was inspired by the social behaviors that I have first noticed in Finland and then also during my exchange time in Tokyo. I find that there were some similarities in social behavior that disturbed me, such as avoiding conflict and hiding the inner opinion. Because of my cultural background as a Finn, I was already frustrated by the norms of social behavior where emotions and opinions tend to be hidden.

In addition to the cultural reasons another layer of frustration causing awkwardness is the gender-related inequalities that are affecting daily life and artistic processes. I have often witnessed and experienced that expressing an opinion and taking it seriously is not self-evident. Perhaps because the inequalities have been recently in a discussion in the culture work field because of #metoo I felt easier to make an art piece about the topic.

As mentioned before there is a sweet spot for awkwardness to arise when the situation or environment is completely new and there are no learnt behaviour models. I was inspired by the moments when I was immersed in awkward situations on many levels because of the cultural differences. In this new situation I had to constantly question my own habits and behavior. The awkwardness comes from being in a situation without any previous experience of social behaviour and struggling with the social standards.

inequality in society and because of the I try to keep on bringing it out in the situations I feel unequal, sometimes succeeding and sometimes not. so trying to point out inequality in an unfamiliar environment is doomed to be awkward which it is not necessarily a negative issue. I already knew my thesis topic when I started working with the Donna Drive so it helped me to go through the process.

It is almost impossible to understand the awkwardness of different cultures before spending time immersed in one and even then it might not happen. For example, a sense of humour is very much dependent on one's cultural background: some jokes just do not work in some places. In Finnish it is possible to say things you don't mean in a sarcastic manner, but that does not necessarily make any sense in other languages. This can be a very important and eye-wide-opening experience and lead to more considerate and compassionate behavior.

Kotsko describes *cultural awkwardness* as following: "*It arises when there seems to be a set of norms in force, but it feels somehow impossible to follow them or even fully know them.*"<sup>40</sup> One of the concrete challenges while my exchange that inspired me for *Donna Drive* was the struggle of understanding what was accepted social behaviour for example when expressing an opinion. The awkward feeling of not knowing how your behaviour is seen and the feeling that there are so many unsaid issues floating in the air became the inspiration. In daily life the unsaid topics can be more general but for *Donna Drive* I wanted to take it further. In *Donna Drive* the unsaid issues included personal lives, love affairs and friendships, the issues that are personal and often avoided.

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40 Kotsko, 2010, 13.

I knew that it would be a challenge but also I knew that this could relieve tension in the environment I was in. The definition of awkwardness is partly present at this artwork: to go the wrong way on purpose. During the process I realized that I was constantly finding ways to gently disrupt the prevalent reality.

### **The importance of social acceptance**

I am going to explain the importance of social acceptance related to awkwardness by using my experience of presenting the mentioned artwork. In my experience the moment of presenting was awkward because of the lack of common language and also because of the different cultural background. Different cultures have different ideas for art, something that is seen as an artwork is not necessary art in different cultures. This is an example of awkwardness related to a culture, there is no wrong or right there are just a different kind of viewpoints.

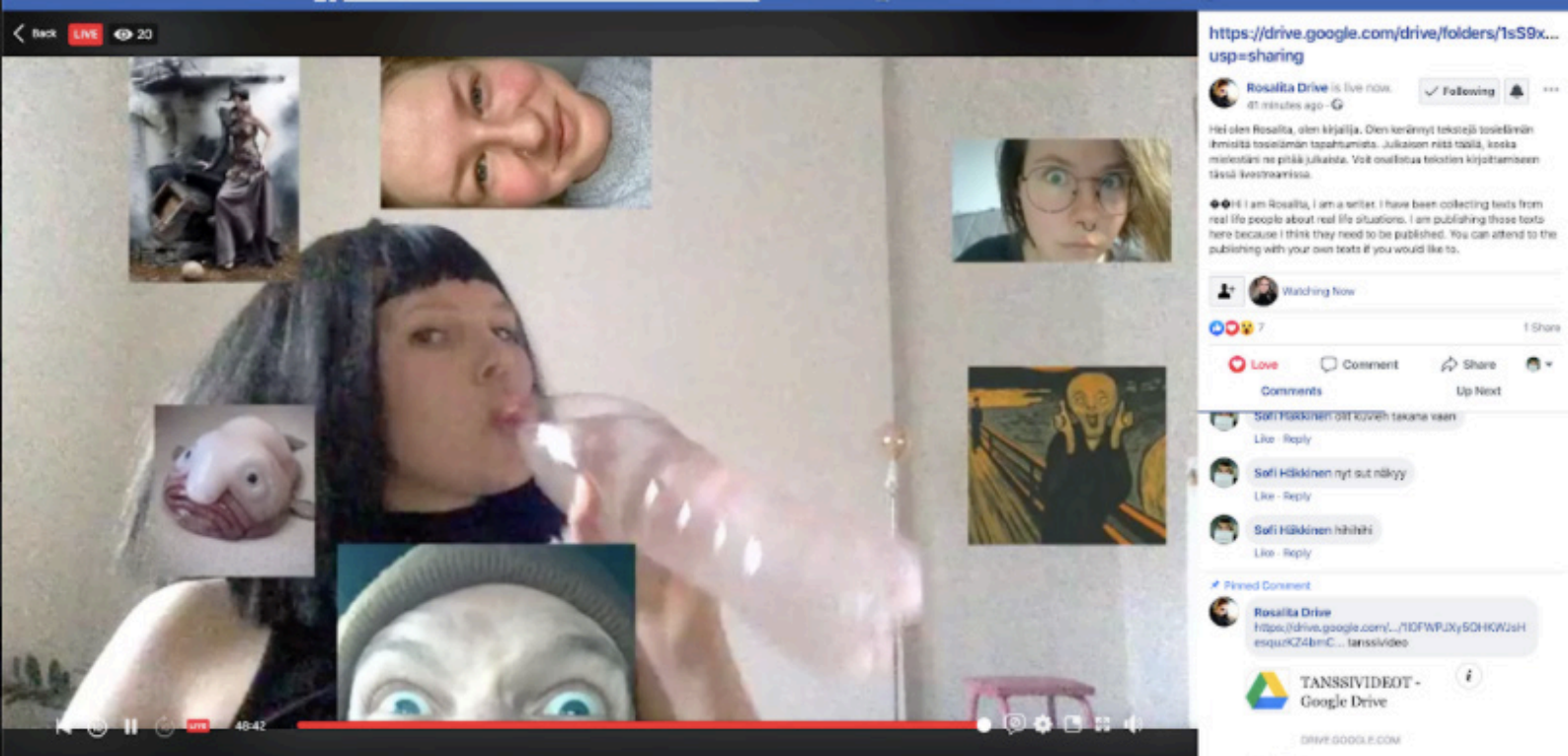
In the exhibition I placed the iPhone in the exhibition space and through the iPhone it was possible to browse the texts that Donna published. For example in this case the iPhone was not necessarily seen as an artwork because it was an iPhone laying on the corner. By presenting the artwork the situation was partly widening up the spectrum of what we in that moment thought was an art, at least for me.

What comes to the texts related to the artwork some of the feedback was that there is *no need* to express the unsaid things and those things are unsaid on purpose and we should not highlight those. I highly disagree with this opinion because hiding just keeps hierarchy going on. Fortunately, after the presentation one of the students pulled me behind the corner and said very gently thank you for being so proud and writing the texts no one is saying aloud.

Again, in this situation where I knew my presentation might be bit uncomfortable and weird I had to prepare myself to have some *control* of the awkwardness. Beforehand I was worried about the audience reception for *Donna Drive* and would the collected texts be too much in the context I was presenting it. The mental preparation for possible awkwardness was more challenging because of the upcoming unfamiliar situation.

Awkwardness is a lot about social behaviour and social acceptance. I might have been worried because of the possible social rejection caused by the uncomfortable texts the artwork was presenting. What comes to the *control of awkwardness* I think I was able to avoid the social rejection because of another artwork I was taking part during the same presentation. I think the other artwork *compensated the amount of awkwardness*. The other project was a extremely beautiful video installation combined with hoop manipulation. That filled the standards and expectations for artwork in this context. The feedback for the other project was delighted and positive. I did not receive much feedback from *Donna Drive*. More or less it seemed that everyone had forgotten (on purpose) the previous presentation with Donna, which, from my experience is very typical social behaviour. I want to mention that this is an simple example of a situation, not the whole story.





Screenshot of Donna Drive live-stream performance in Playdate Remote (2020)

After resuming back to Finland I wanted to expand the idea of Donna in the more familiar environment. As a response for the ongoing COVID-19 isolation period the whole world is living Donna Drive escalated into a Facebook live-stream performance. During the livestream Donna is giving certain topics and opening up new Google Docs-forms in Google Drive Folders where the participants can write their own responses anonymously. The first performance was held on an event hosted by Kaiken Keskus Playdate Remote 4th of April 2020. The performance lasted for 4 hours on a Saturday evening. The topics of the texts written together with the participants were for example: *The last thing I was ashamed of*, *list of favourite snacks*, *what do I do when I am in love*.

The audience response was surprisingly excited. They committed easily and participated in the writing and commenting actively. The livestream was mostly in Finnish so I was more familiar with the audience than previously. The knowledge of the cultural behaviour helps a lot with working with awkwardness. Sensing the social situation is very gentle. The process of live-streamed performance is still going on.

## The awkwardness of an iPhone

Because of my background with performing I have a tendency to think of objects as performers. While placing them into the exhibition place I am thinking of the set up as a choreography for objects. Their position is a performance.<sup>41</sup> I chose the iPhone as an object for *Donna Drive* because I think it can be one of the most awkward daily-life objects. It is awkward because it is so personal. There are all the possibilities for humiliation from secret private messages to browser history and picture collections. The iPhone is also a social status symbol as the Apple brand is associated with higher prices and an upper class clientele. Accordingly, the iPhone is also a trendy object to have. This is another case where the very existence of an object can be a vessel of awkwardness too.

The object itself is not awkward, but the human behavior behind the object can be. Leaving a smartphone behind has the potential of revealing an uncomfortable amount of personal information about its owner. Is sharing too much information awkward? *Donna Drive* is all about “oversharing.”<sup>42</sup> Why is oversharing a thing? Is it possible to share too much? Again the question is where goes the limits of sharing? Who decides what is too much, what is too intimate?

Leaving an object at the wrong place at the wrong time can be super awkward. Or imagine if your iPhone rings at an inappropriate time, very awkward. Still, the actual cause of the awkwardness is the human behavior behind it: the one who poured their life into the phone, or the one who called. Compare the forgetting the iPhone to a situation where someone has accidentally saved their password to a public computer. The awkwardness is related to the fear of revealing too much of oneself.

*Photo: Donna's iPhone, Tama Art University, (2019)*

41 See also: Kassem Ayman, “A Performative understanding of spatial design, learning from exhibitions,” City University, Faculty of architecture and design, (Lebanon: 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20196403006>.

42 Cambridge Dictionary, “Overshare,” Accessed April 18, 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/overshare>.





## Questions about awkwardness

### *Is useless awkward?*

Kotsko claims that humans need explanations: awkwardness is what happens when you can not grasp the cause or explanation behind an action or event. We need to see a reason to be comfortable with an action.<sup>43</sup> I agree with Kotsko's point, and I see a correlation between what he describes that people tend to look for reasons. We can argue what is a solid reason and what is not. That again is the question of prevalent norms and presumptions. For example, if you see an adult playing in a playground without a child is it awkward because it is unusual scenery and there is no visible reason for them to do so? Playing does not lead efficiently to any "production". In a capitalist society, play is not valued unless it can generate financial profit. We could ask, isn't having fun enough reason for action? Do actions always need to be productive? How do you measure productivity? Is all the art awkward because it is hard to measure for its productivity?

Although from a viewer's perspective circus might be about prowess and risk-taking; from a performer's perspective, it is often about producing the maximum effect involving minimal effort or risk. The stunning trick is often made as ergonomic as possible, maximizing the bodily capacity by using as little effort as possible for a movement. I play with the dichotomy of these goals in my practice, and by derailing expectations I create awkwardness. There is a general assumption still, that actions lead to something. In my performances: sometimes the action is the thing, and it causes nothing: running for the sake of running and not as a preparation. For the audience, this could be seen as a disappointment if the trick never comes. Is the action awkward because the reason is the action itself and it is not necessarily leading to anything else?

In the politics of circus arts, tricks can create an awkward gap between the performer and the viewer because they are movements that only a few can perform. Showing off a trick presumes assumption that the viewer is unable to perform this skill, and therefore creates a clear hierarchy. A trick can be a tool in one's artistic practice, but *a trick as a trick* is entertainment. Showing off the trick is not only awkward. The joy of aesthetically pleasing trick and the incredible power of the human body can be itself very pleasant and joyful to watch and that itself is a reason enough to make tricks.

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<sup>43</sup> Kotsko, 2010, 13.



## The Age of Awkwardness

Kotsko writes about *The Office*, a television series set in a white-collar working space where very little effort is put towards actual work. They are reluctant to do their jobs as they are trying to avoid awkwardness.<sup>44</sup> This awkwardness would erupt if they were to admit that there is no reasonable productivity associated with their office work. The lack of meaning expands from their office work to their daily life.

According to Kotsko, holding on to traditional American values can be easier than changing these habits. Kotsko proposes that the origins of the current “awkward society” are set in the 1960s when the feminist and African-American civil rights movement shook the social norms. The mentioned movements exposed that the standard American values were not constructed to include everyone, but instead to exclude specific groups and therefore created hierarchy. Still today, according to Kotsko, Western capitalist cultures are unable to give up these norms, and that is why we are living in an awkward age.<sup>45</sup>

Modern western societies have their norms and strict standards regarding *being normal*. Being normal and fitting in this suggested frame is set as a goal. The roots of the normal lie in the idea of a standard well-being Western life-style that became a goal of life after industrialization. I am claiming that the history of society’s norms and learned habits that are quite narrow and exclusive is still present these days. As an example, the classic awkward questions at the dinner table: ”So, when are you getting married? What about having children?”. It will be regarded as awkward not to succeed on this path, based on accepted notions of *good* values such as the nuclear family<sup>46</sup> as defined by the social norms. Society needs norms and values to function and there will always be differences between those. Perhaps we could avoid comparing the varying norms and values but instead try to widen up the idea of the normal. Then, again, there is a paradox because the narrowness of normal can protect radical discrimination from becoming normal.

The actual awkwardness buds in the assumption that everyone should aim for these “*readymade*” goals. These limiting views can cause awkwardness when confronted with differences, and it is tough for one to be put in a situation, where their beliefs or mere existences are being questioned or denied. Sometimes in an awkward situation, it is easier to deny the mistake one has made than to admit one. This could be seen as an attempt to avoid awkwardness. Instead, the situation turns over and the awkwardness reverses back as a situation where the ones witnessing the attempt to avoid awkwardness, for example by telling lies or defending with untruthfulness, are getting awkward because they realize the attempt.

Awkwardness in its worst can be extremely uncomfortable and can also raise violent feelings of depression and shame. Being awkward by not fitting in social standards can cause social rejection. This can lead to isolation and hence mental health problems. Where did the so-called “good values” come from? Who do these norms serve and who do they impact? Who are the ones deciding?

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<sup>44</sup> Kotsko, 2010, 19-20.

<sup>45</sup> Kotsko, 2010, 13-17.

<sup>46</sup> See also: Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Nuclear Family,” Accessed April 18th, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/nuclear-family>.

## Why awkwardness is a relevant tool for an artist?

Awkwardness can be a tool for artistic purposes, but *not an answer*. The way I use subtle awkwardness and not straight up embarrassment in my works is not to embarrass others on purpose but to show inequality. As a member of Guerrilla girls (Guerrilla Girls is an activist group founded in 1985 in the United States of America with the purpose of attacking the inequalities in art focusing on sexism and racism) commented: “*embarrassment being a powerful tool but not enough to change the world.*”<sup>47</sup> Guerrilla Girls have used embarrassment in their works (that does entail awkwardness on some level) when revealing inequality in society. The distinction between embarrassment and causing awkwardness is important. Embarrassment is an overlapping feeling with awkwardness but it is still quite different. It is a tool to bring out inequality.

The following quote is an excerpt from The Science of Awkwardness presented by Anna Medaris Miller on health.usnews. It summarises eloquently why an awkwardness is a relevant tool for artists. At the core of my artistic practice is the aspiration to invent alternatives. Sometimes the existing norms can be very narrow and widening them can allow a much-needed relief.

*“As uncomfortable as they are, awkward situations seem to have a purpose: to alert us of social expectations and boundaries – and motivate us to avoid making the same mistake twice. Clegg theorizes that social awkwardness works as a “social early warning system.” His research has shown that people tend to pay extra attention to the social atmosphere during an awkward moment by, for example, being unable to take their eyes off the person who told the off-color joke. At the same time, they’re acutely aware of their own physical discomfort, be it in the form of a blushing face, a pit in the stomach or a racing heart.”[That]motivates us to act on that information and bring our social environment back into equilibrium,” Clegg speculates.”<sup>48</sup>*

Awkwardness leaves a memorable trace which is not necessarily a bad or embarrassing one. It can lead to a newfound understanding which can allow personal growth, granting someone a new perspective on their privileges. The moment itself can be awkward for the one scrutinized, but it sure leaves a strong memory - strong enough to contemplate actions that can be taken granted in life and possibly to question and change one’s routines and learned norms.

Using awkwardness as a tool just because of leaving a strong memory can be a bit dangerous though. I suggest that it can be an addition to the work, not a goal. I think being remembered as an artist or because of artwork should not be the reason for making an art piece because that can lead mislead artistic processes somewhere where the intention was not to. On the other hand, shocking has been present among the artists for a long time for example among the dadaists in the early 20th century already when Duchamp placed the readymade urinal *Fountain* in the exhibition.<sup>49</sup> This is another topic that I will not go too deep into in this thesis but I think it is related and should be mentioned.

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47 Felshin, 1995, p.331.

48 Miller, Anna Medaris. “The Science of Awkwardness” USN: 23rd Nov 2015. Accesed 21st March 2020 <https://health.usnews.com/health-news/health-wellness/articles/2015/11/23/the-science-of-awkwardness>.

49 See also: Anika Dačić, “Has Shock Art Become an Obsolete Term in the 21st Century?” Widewalls, Sept 2015, <https://www.widewalls.ch/shock-art-21-century/>.

## How to cope with awkwardness?

To use awkwardness as a tool, it is helpful to understand that performers can be merely passers-by in the spectators' lives. As a performer, it is needed to have a certain detachment and objectivity for the performing situation. It can be revealing and beneficial to assimilate that the performers are not the center of everyone's attention, because ultimately everyone really is focused on themselves. One is always the focal point of one's own experience and so others are the focal points of their own experiences. Therefore, however embarrassing the situation might seem to the artist, chances are that the audience is only involved in a limited amount of this discomfort.

Awkwardness can be irritating and embarrassing but it is not fatal. Having awkward situations in performance, on purpose or not, is not necessarily dangerous. This is accurate both spinning a hoop awkwardly in the middle of a crowd or being a high-level skilled juggler who drops the ball on stage. In both occasions the audience or the witnesses do not necessarily even notice or remember what happened in the "performer's" reality, because they can be so concentrated on themselves: a bit uncomfortable sitting position on the chair, or the buzzing of a text message on the phone. Still, this understanding should not lead to indifferent performing.

## Benefits of awkwardness

Dealing with awkwardness can be freeing. To be able to be OK with awkwardness one has to admit the differences in people and face one's own limitations and awkward privilege. In my practice, relief of an awkward moment is closely related to humor, laughing at oneself and taking things not in such a serious manner. For example, I feel that in some situations I am able to deconstruct the discomfort related to performing to humor partly because the discomfort has become so familiar during these artistic processes.

Surviving an awkward situation can increase the ability to challenge oneself to face more difficult situations, in other words, get braver socially and develop one's character. To be able to succeed socially includes the willingness to take social risks, to speak up when one is scared or ashamed. The more risks one takes, the more one will succeed but also fail. Taking risks is essential to be able to learn and try out new. Learning to fail and not getting devastated but instead learn about the uncomfortable situation is beneficial from discomfort. The outcomes of risk-taking include possible failure or rejection as well. Handling rejection is possible to learn as well as handling awkwardness. More risk-taking might have a correlation to more options in life for example socially or what comes to the working-possibilities. This is not always the case, but can be. When one has more options there are more things to choose from. The ability to choose creates power.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Adam Galinsky, "How to speak up when you feel like you can't?" (TEDX: NewYork Dec 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPzccnst-Xg&app=desktop>.

An example of a situation related to the power hierarchy: a female performer can have fewer performing options than a male performer.<sup>51</sup> She can face the situation that she has to take the job what she gets even when it is not fulfilling what she is looking for. When a performer is in a situation where there is no choice that creates a situation where there is also no margin to negotiate a better salary or better working conditions. The female performer can already be oppressed by her lower position in the social hierarchy, in comparison to her male counterpart. One solution might be that the more auditions the performer goes to, the more options she has. In other words: the more awkward, social rejection she is able to handle, the more potential doors open up. When she is allowed to make a choice in these opportunities she has leverage and is able to negotiate her salary or other resources. I see that getting more tolerant towards awkwardness also as a way to challenge the patriarchy. Nevertheless the situation is often not so simple, because attending to auditions is demanding and it is not so easy just go and face the discomfort.

## Benefits of assumptions

Once in a while, I am playing a part of female performer on the stage with a hoop. My aim is to acknowledge the presumptions that might come with this and my purpose is to break these expectations. Often I try not to provide the usual hoop tricks but instead, a cringe movement that in itself is fluent but could be seen as weird and not suitable. This is one way how I am trying to widen up the spectrum of expectations related to female circus performers. After doing it for a while the clumsy, cringe, weird movement became a trademark. During my BA studies in circus school in Turku Academy of Arts, I also studied clownery. In clownery, it is important to face the awkwardness and cringe, to become aware of one's clumsy features.

In the circus, tricks can be expected and it is possible that the audience gets disappointed if they don't get to see any during a performance. From my perspective, this is related to entertainment codes that involve seducing the audience by providing them with what they want. It is possible play with this code to catch the attention and then choose to go in a different direction. According to Schechner, entertainment is something that is produced in order to please the public.<sup>52</sup> For me, that is often not enough of a reason to perform, and I have to go beyond the crowd pleasing. I do consider the audience thoroughly in my work, but I do not see it necessary just to please the audience. Neither entertainment nor art is any less valuable to each other. They can mix up with each other and benefit from each other. Sometimes it is even hard to define what is entertainment and what is art. Mixing those can be fruitful.

I agree with Lambert-Beatty's writing about Rainer's dance performance in the 1960's: *"Displaying the moving body for you, without any attempt to seduce or affirm you, does not remove dance from the condition of the exhibition, after all. It reduces the performance situation to the fact of the display."*<sup>53</sup> I love to play with the assumption of the trick. For example, in one performance of mine there is a moment where I am about to spin the hoop around my waist but instead of doing so, I drop the hoop and just look at the audience in silence. It reveals the condition of the human behind the trick. This action relates closely to Lambert-Beatty's thoughts on the movement becoming displayed in the exhibition.

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51 Mari Jäntti, "Liian harva nainen pääsee loistamaan teattereissa – näin ajattelee Oulun teatterin uusi johtaja, joka aikoo rikkoa alan sukupuolittuneisuutta," YLE-uutiset, (Dec 2019) , [https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11146550?fbclid=IwAR2GTEZ3XX8daELt\\_biaXeDG3Q7dOIY5j6bRXHTq1xkhqjIh6Y4XFrfiAhg](https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11146550?fbclid=IwAR2GTEZ3XX8daELt_biaXeDG3Q7dOIY5j6bRXHTq1xkhqjIh6Y4XFrfiAhg).

52 Schechner, 2002, 39.

53 Lambert-Beatty, Carrie, *Being Watched - Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*, (MIT Press: 2008), 8.



## Conclusion

The most valuable lesson that I learned while writing this thesis on awkwardness as a tool in my artistic practice, was the confrontation of my own privilege. I often put myself in a situation where I had to change my perspective by placing myself in other people's situations who were involved with the artistic processes or performances. I was constantly challenged to justify why I was doing what I was doing, which is an essential part of an artistic process. Sometimes I faced things that I did not expect, and it opened up discussions and educated me about various aspects that I should consider while creating performances. The process of this learning is still ongoing.

A professor at Aalto University once commented on my work after a presentation, saying it reminded her of "small activism, daily-life activism". I remember being uncomfortable with the fact that my artworks could have been seen as activism because for me it referred to the political sphere and that didn't seem like a positive thing to me at the time. I wanted my artworks to be art, nothing else. After further thinking, it became clear that all art, and actually everything anyone does, is political. I still would not describe my work as "straight on activism", but I am willing to admit that there are similarities, and I now see it as a positive thing.

In her text *"But Is It Art - The Spirit of Art as Activism"* Nina Felshin writes the following: *"Activist art, in both of its forms and methods, is process- rather than object- or product-oriented, and usually takes place in public sites rather than within the context of art-world venues. As a practice, it often takes the form of temporal interventions, such as performance or performance-based activities, media events, exhibitions and installations."*<sup>54</sup> I still would not call my art as activism, but my work definitely fits into this kind of an idea about art.

I have been thinking a lot about who's voice is heard, who is listening, and who is talking, but I still feel it is not enough. There is a lot yet to learn. At the beginning of a Guerrilla Girls performance held in the Montgomery Museum of Fine Art, they stated: *"I have to wear a hot, heavy gorilla mask on this stage to get your attention."*<sup>55</sup> A similar thing I remember was a circus artist, who – before starting a street show supporting Romanian children – did a backflip and stated: *"To get you to listen to me, I have to do a backflip."* Only then he started to talk about the situation considering the children. Through these examples, I realized my endless possibilities to use circus art as a tool for getting people's attention, but also to be very careful with the outcomes. Contemporary circus is my gorilla mask.

A driving force behind my work is equality. I would like to live in a society where there was more variety of content that we are seeing on stage and screens. The questions about whose voice and whose viewpoint dominates the world keep coming up. For me, this is clearly connected to awkwardness. The power hierarchy is painfully awkward in many ways: it is awkward to realize one's position in the hierarchy. Dealing with awkwardness can open up possibilities to challenge the prevalent learned habits and norms that support inequality.

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<sup>54</sup> Felshin, 1995, 10-11.

<sup>55</sup> Felshin, 1995, 309.

I think that awkwardness is hilarious. It is funny and terrible at the same time. Working with awkwardness enables us to confront the shame that can prevent us from living our lives as fully as we could. Through awkwardness, it can be possible to deal with things that are hard to digest, such as shame or shyness. It can help to point out offensive behavior such as sexist jokes. Practice with awkwardness is full of surprises, contrasts, and extremities. There have been a lot of moments filled with laughter. I will repeat from the beginning: *Awkwardness strips off the cover that we are so much holding on to.*

When working with awkwardness one has to consider the process constantly, so that as many aspects as possible are taken into account. Awkwardness does not necessarily only reveal and support equality, but it can also be used for the opposite.



Photo: Iidaliina Linnea, edit Sofi Häkkinen (2018)



That is to say, that awkwardness can be used for, for example, getting attention. As mentioned before, the rhetorics of populism take advantage of saying inappropriate things in public, that is one reason why populism gets attention in the media. Even though I am criticizing the narrowness of some of the existing norms, I want to point out that the norms can also protect society positively. In this sense, in my artistic practice I am trying not to shock for the sake of attention, but instead, gently suggest alternatives that can be taken into account – or not.

To further my research of awkwardness as a tool in artistic practice, I would suggest taking more different viewpoints into account from different cultural backgrounds. Awkwardness related to social behavior to such an extent, that I suggest diving into reading anthropology and research on human behavior. I would also add more art history and examples from artists who have been working with awkwardness for a longer period of time. Even though awkwardness is now considered a trend, as mentioned before in this thesis, it has been a tool for art for a long time.

Exploring awkwardness has definitely widened up my spectrum of trying out new material and allowed me to be more gentle in regard to my own mistakes. During my master studies, the level of my own artistic expectations has risen. Fortunately dealing with awkwardness has made me less embarrassed about my mistakes, and more open to sharing my unfinished artistic processes. Now, it is easier to share unfinished works and discuss them. And that is fruitful. Somehow I have changed from a nitpicker to a more relaxed artist. I think that is seen in the result as more natural, happier and open artworks. Still, awkwardness is present.



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## **Other**

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